

***Fiction***

# Faded Into Blue

Patrick M Heffernan

At least once a week, but no more than once a day, a twin turbo-prop rode up the neck's gravel road—the one that split the Adam's apple dunes in two—and socked the head right in the jaw, splitting its lip clean open. To the east, caught extending into the bay, almost to the shoulder, were the hairs, the beard, the conglomerate of eutrophied muck tangled in an interwoven algal mess along the benthic zone. To the west, caught against the open sky and unblemished sea, was Carrickfinn Beach, shaved smooth by the endless droning razor-waves that cut away even the deepest of divots.

My footprints shaved away behind me, as if I was never really there, and Chekov's rifle slung over my shoulder. Each step tapped the butt deeper into my back like a nail. A necrotic bruise spread, spider-webbing into chlorosis.

Ahead of me were the stones, the heaps of moon rocks, cubed and smoothed. Herbivorous teeth looking for a bite. I flossed through them, dragging my feet to collect cracked bivalves into little piles that could be swept back into the water column. Then, as any worthwhile brusher knows to do, I flossed back through to the beach.

The sand beneath the breaking water enveloped my wellies and yanked down, begging me to stay. I couldn't oblige. There were things to be done, to be ended, before play. I found a dry patch away from the water and waited; my eyes locked on the dunes towering above.

The behemoths were tumors, formed by mounds built on lost disarray, held together, calcified, by nets

of roots. As they expanded, the neck choked, and air struggled to squeeze through nature's winding maze.

There were three things that didn't struggle through them. The first was the hares, who trampled the grass and moss so often that their trails riddled the landscape from hole to hole. The second was the dogs, who followed the hares' trodden map but could not hide beneath the surface. The third was him, the man with only a mouth, who wandered where he should and lingered where he shouldn't, coming and going, very little wanted, very little needed.

He stood before me with a crooked grin cracked below his empty sockets. He couldn't see, but he knew the way. "It's delightful to see you," he said. "Why have you found me on this lovely day?"

"I haven't decided yet," I said. My eyes were snared behind him on his never-fading footprints. Even if he walked near the shore, where razor burn festered most, they wouldn't shave. His mark was permanent and unyielding. His tracks were ubiquitous. I looked into his skull and unshouldered my rifle. "I think I came here to kill you."

His head tilted askew. "Then why have you not already?"

The bolt slid light: open. "Because a small part of me still wants to see."

With a nod, "You, and most." He took a step forward, his naked toes curling around a shell. I expected a crab to run out and crunch between his metatarsals, but the air was too thin for that kind of life.

“I can let you see.”

I held his sickle smile down, tremors on the edge of my lips. “Mind over matter.” The bolt slid heavy: closed.

“Right now,” he took another step forward, “you see regret.”

“Yes,” I nodded. “In coming here, I think.”

“To Carrickfinn?”

“To somewhere new.” I fit the butt beneath my collarbone. “I spent years begging to get away, years searching for some escape. Now the difference is driving me mad.”

“Habitualized?”

“Haunted,” I clicked my tongue. “By you. None of this is my choice. I’m caught on your reel.”

A fly buzzed out of his right socket. “You want what you can’t have.”

“I want to live here without being anchored down by you.”

“Anchored down?” he laughed. “No, no, no, my dear friend. I help you be free. I help you expand and prepare. There is so much to see, so much left in store for you. Let me take you to where you want to go.”

“I think I’ve seen too much.” I found his head between the sights. “Perhaps it’s time.”

He chuckled. “Aim for the heart. That’s where I have a hold on you.”

I obliged.

“All your life, you’ve lacked verve, and now here we are.” He stepped in close and traced his finger around the muzzle. “But please, before you squeeze, give one last look. See, one last time.”

I held my aim.

“I’m yours to do with, my friend. Use me.”

“What would I even see?”

“Oh, the same, the same, and the same. A promise of what will come and what will be.”

“Empty.” I tore skin off my lip. “Your knowledge doesn’t control the future.”

“All actions are truth-making, so the future controls

my knowledge. The choice is there, and though I happen to know what that choice may be, it is still yours.”

“I’ve seen before, and it’s hardly truth”

He smiled a delicious smile. “For you, a bounded man, not quite yet; for me, unbounded, always.”

“So, I see one last time, and then what?” I dragged my finger across the trigger, each ridge catching the edge. “Will that let time go lightly?”

“If you choose.”

The gooseflesh rose beneath my layers, mammalian irony. It would be so easy to shrug the weight off my shoulders. All it would take was a twitch, a spasm. Through the trailing smoke, he would slump to the ground, a little emptier on the inside. I would walk away, washing my hands in the sea and letting my feet sink into the sand, and then it would be my turn to smile. But no matter how far I would go, his rotting stench would carry. It would trickle in and crinkle my nose, and I would know I had spoiled the land. The only way out would be to remove him. Dead weight to carry, back on the shoulders.

I lowered the rifle.

His open palm extended. “Follow. This is your time.”

How nice of him to offer.

Like the dogs, we walked along the hare trails, tiptoeing through the dew-ridden grass and over the swollen carpet moss, between the towering dunes and past the blowout.

Sometimes, when the wind wandered lost through the neck and had no place to go, it would nosedive deep into the hare holes. Running, hiding, and encompassing itself in solid comfort like a child under a bed. But every child must move on. Pressurized, the wind would erupt, a cacophony of brittle deconstruction as the roots wriggled and the sand fell apart. Blowout. The hares lost a home, and the dogs broke their feet in the ditches that remained.

We passed several blowout carcasses on our

way. The smell hammered into the nostrils much like the wind invaded the holes, resulting in a snot-filled explosion. The maggots wriggled in the rotting flesh, and the dipterans swarmed in clouds above, clogging the mind.

Life beyond death, a comfort and a curse.

“May I ask you one question?” he said with a flicker of his tongue.

“You will anyway.” I hopped over a waterlogged moss bed.

“Why do you no longer find this necessary?”

I hesitated, letting the distance stretch between us. “It’s time I be myself.”

“This is yourself.”

“I’ve moved on.”

He laughed. “Yet you come back.”

The sun came back, if not for a moment, breaking through the cumulonimbus blanket that suffocated the land, that swallowed every last plane taking off towards the sky, towards the south, towards the crowds. A ray or two peeked through, seeking home, a permanent dwelling place. Then the holes filled in, the rays dimmed, and the moment was over.

“I can’t help myself,” I said. “I’m on your reel. That’s why I brought a solution.” I shifted my rifle.

“Will that bring you satisfaction?” he asked.

“At least a little. You’ll probably live on, but at least I can say I tried.”

“True. It is always worthwhile to try.” He stopped in front of a door—three-feet by six-eight, four indented patterns lacquered maroon, and a little scratched hook, begging for holiday—embedded into a dune. A brass knocker hung near the knob. A bit low for most people, but just right for me.

I reached to enter, but he grabbed hold of my wrist, jagged nails digging into my skin.

“One moment, my dear,” he stepped beside the doorway and yanked out a fistful of roots from the dune. The sand collapsed, and, in its place, a four-paned window appeared, once edged with white, but now

crusted yellow. The curtains draped to block out the sun, but through the crack, there was a flicker of light. Someone was home.

“Will I just watch?” I asked.

“You will see,” he commanded before knocking three times at the door.

From my sunken perch between the couch cushions, I heard the three knocks, the starting gun. I dropped the tea bag into the boiling water and sat back.

Twenty years spent between the walls, navigating the spackle and eschewing the mold. Once a week, once a day, once an hour, turning to go, but going nowhere. Twenty years spent running twenty feet just to arrive at the same house, and then another twenty feet just to arrive once again. An endless feedback loop stuck in descending cyclical time. Anywhere’s a better place to be.

When I was young, when I still uncovered the stones in the yard, poked at ant colonies, and marveled at tubular arachnid silk, I tried to escape with a stuffed military sack pack over my shoulders. It was filled with three pairs of socks, four shirts, zip off pants, extra Benadryl, eight expired cans, one half-eaten bag of chips, a journal with no pen, dog tags, coyote tags, a tarp, some wood glue, three and a half pocket knives, a double-a radio, and surplus triple-a’s just in case. Yukon, ho! The edge of town, ho!

I begged for crop circles in the fields beyond. I begged for targets. I took aim. Fire.

Twenty feet, and another twenty feet, and another twenty feet.

Dichotomy paradox. I never arrived.

But one time I had left. At least, I think I did. That’s what he told me. That’s what he showed me. I had punched the head in the chin, socked some whiskers clean off, and made it my own. I had embedded myself in the folklore and lost my chains. I had moved on.

And then I had moved back.

Three knocks echoed from the maroon door once again. The tea was steeped, but now it was cool to the

touch.

A glimpse beyond. A crack in the surface, now coming to shatter. I wanted to punch it, weather the cuts, vaporize it, breathe the silica air. Eutrophied muck grew from my chin in splotches, tangling around my throat and collapsing my trachea. The wind had nowhere to go, so it dug deep and erupted, a pressurized bomb set off by my own stagnancy.

I opened the door, and the man with only a mouth entered.

“Wipe your feet,” I told him. “You always leave footprints everywhere.”

He streaked my welcome mat with grain-fed mud. His toes would never shine, but it did the job. Not that I cared much. My feet were plenty dirty too.

“Thank you.” I dropped some ice cubes—an attempted salvage mission—into my tea and took a few good sips.

“Dear me,” he whispered through a grin, “it’s quite dark in here. I feel like some wriggling earthworm, and I’m sure you do too. Do you mind if I open the blinds?”

“You can’t even see.”

He shrugged and let the light in through my four-paned window.

Three photos were on the wall. One old, one absent, and one new. The old was of an infant tossing his stuffed bear down the stairs. His plaid overalls were opaque through the sun stained blue tinge. The absent was a stock photo surrounded by a sea-shell frame. A do it yourself masterpiece made from a do it my way kit. The new was of a beach, clean and solitary with moon rocks rising from the plain. Rain-jacket armor over water-logged skin.

“Why are you here again?” I asked. “It seems a little rude to show up unannounced.”

“If I was unwanted, perhaps it would be.”

“You are unwanted.”

“Your façade is charming, however deleterious. No matter. A more pressing matter is at hand it seems. So, if you don’t mind me asking, why the knife?”

It felt warm in my hand. Ten inches of serrated steel molded into a fine point. By the pricking of my thumbs, it hadn’t been sharpened in years, but it still tore.

“I think I want to be rid of you,” I said. “Seems fitting.”

“You don’t want to be rid of me. You want to be rid of what I can show you.” He took a step towards me, laying one splayed toe down at a time. “You need me. You’re not happy without me.”

“I’m not happy with you.”

“I’m your only connection to the time you left.”

“You’re a virus to the time I have left.”

He grabbed my hand and brought the blade to his throat. “Then kill me. Kill the only thing you have left.”

Eighty-four hooks, cast by rusted steel rods, burrowed into me. Their barbs—some treble, some jig—caught me. The string was held taught. There was no step I could take without being pulled back. There was no thought I could think without being yanked back to the head.

“You need to see,” he whispered.

“I want to be done with this.”

“You belong there. Let me take you back.”

“I can go back on my own. Without you.”

He laughed. “How silly of you, my dear. Do you really believe that?” He pushed the knife against his skin. “You will never be that full again. But if you truly want to, go ahead, grasp at your straws. Just remember that I am your only option for something more.”

“As if you’re giving me anything more than straws.”

“What I show you is real. When you see, you’re truly there.”

“I can do better than you.”

“Then kill me. Drag that blade across my throat, watch me die, and remember that it was you that threw away your only chance at life.”

I squeezed the handle.

“I’m your only passage to that moment, your only way of actualizing your aim.”

I stared into his sockets, into the flesh fading into

darkness. I needed to be, not just to see. I needed to fire. The pack was still in the basement, the clothes were clean, the cans were still past due. I could still run.

“One more time?” I said.

“One more time.”

I nodded and scratched the blade off his epidermis.

His hand slithered around and caught hold of my wrist, jagged nails digging deep into my skin. A tug, a yank, a direction. He pulled me over to the four-paned window and stood me up straight.

“See,” he commanded.

I saw myself through the window. My mug was empty. No more tea, no more melted ice. A blank slate. There I was, rain-jacket shrugged around my shoulders, damp jeans clung to my legs, and wellies up my calves; and there I was, flannel draped across my back, jeans held up by a frayed rope belt, and eight-year-old socks threaded around my toes.

“What is this?” I said.

“Identity,” the man said before shrinking away into the corner.

My face dripped more than the tears, more than the mist. It melted into the fabric below, into the slouch and grumble, encysting into my stomach and anchoring me down, anchoring me from thought to reality.

I mumbled through the window, but I couldn't hear. I needed to hear.

I took the butt of the gun, and I took the handle of my knife, and I shattered the glass between myself. The shards crunched beneath my wellies and cut through my threadbare socks as I stepped forward. With no divide, a look—nothing more than a glance—into my eyes, into an understanding. There was no separation; there was no distance. One in the same, I was I.

“Why do you keep coming back?” I asked myself.

“If I knew the answer, I wouldn't.”

I looked into my eyes, young, yet weathered. Metals and nutrients leaked from them, bloodshot. Barren land seeping into barren water. The fish kill was heavy.

“Cut the barbs and run to where he can't find you,”

I said. “Anywhere but here.”

“They're in too deep. I may cut too much.”

“Then stay. Please, for the love of me, stay. Don't come back.”

“He'll take me back,” I said, shaking my head.

“Offers I can't refuse.”

I adjusted my grip on the handle and ran my finger along the barrel. “It's time to be rid of him then.”

Over in the corner, the man with only a mouth took a break from sharpening his teeth with his tongue to shudder and laugh.

I sighed. “You know I can't carry that weight.”

“Can I even live without him?”

“Maybe, but it's not worth the risk.”

I nodded. “Then where does that leave me?”

“Still lost, I suppose.”

I hummed, two-toned. “So, I should stay.”

“In both places, yes.”

“And forget?”

“Yes.”

I laughed, crinkled skin folding at the corners of my eyes, lapses of blue-green flickering with the occasional combustion. “I guess there'll never be an answer.”

“To what I'm seeking? Not a chance.”

There were other places beyond the dunes, beyond the home. One was on the back patio of a three-storied townhouse. The air was crisp, the food was dense, and the pages to thumb through were endless. Another was among the jutting rocks with cracks filled in by snow, above the valley, where the mugs were filled to the brim, the pots were melted, and the bread was homemade. There was another in the middle of the street, surrounded by chalk and broken brakes. There was another, but I did not know.

“Tell me this, at least, is it better where I am?”

“No, but it will be. Give it time.”

I nodded and looked myself up and down, taking in the nooks and crannies that only I knew about, the places where the hooks caught and the waves shaved.

“Thank you,” I said, before turning away, back to my

chilled tea.

I smiled a heavy smile and left, wandering through the winding maze of dunes until a twin turbo-prop socked the head in the jaw and led me out. When I reached the shore, I flossed through the herbivorous teeth and revisited the shore, where I flipped off my wellies and sunk my toes into the sand. The man with only a mouth lurked behind the tall grass as he always would and watched my digits fade into blue. I didn't have the strength to carry him, nor did I have the strength to leave him behind, but perhaps someday I would have the strength to take his hand, for once, and help him see. Hope is a dangerous thing, however, and it's best not to dwell in it.

By the time I walked away, I was beneath the stars. They winked at me every step of the way. Behind me, the endless droning of razor waves cut away my prints, as if I was never really there, but the shore left little grains under my nails, in my wellies, and inside my ears. Little seeds sown as reminders. Reminders that I was there. Reminders that I had nowhere and everywhere to be.

# The Ties that Bind

Anna Ross

Content Warning: rape and self-harm

You stand in front of the bathroom mirror with your sister Abigail, whose eyes no longer hold oceans, but Sunday coffee—just like yours—and as you both run a brush through your hair, Abigail’s grows two inches which was the same length as yours when you were sixteen; it was the perfect length for that senior boy from Spanish class to grab as he kissed your neck and forced you into a dark room at a party where you did not know the host—but hey, everyone was going to be there—and as you both cake on foundation, Abigail’s features begin to look more like your own, and then she covers the hickey on the side of her neck; you did the same when you hooked-up with any guy who showed you interest because all you wanted was to feel in control of your own body, but that sense of security never came; as Abigail runs a curling iron through her hair, scars form down her wrists on the same spots you used to drag razors and flames because each time you closed your eyes you thought about how he forced you into a cold room, the sound of a locking door, and the feeling of his breath on your neck as he forced himself on you while you cried; your sister blends concealer under her eyes, but the dark circles deepen with each brush stroke because—just like you—she tries to hide the nights where she cannot close her eyes without feeling the weight of an unwelcome intruder on top of her, but she cannot tell anyone because no one believes the girl in these scenarios, so you both run peach lip balm over your mouths that kissed the ends of red solo cups and cigarettes every weekend because you

wanted to feel better for a night; you wanted to forget; Abigail flashes you a smile with glossed over lips, but you cannot tell which reflection is yours, and your little sister’s legs grow another inch and her eyes become empty, so you begin to worry that the oceans will not return, her hair will remain long, and her scars will not fade because you know all too well the weight of silence; then mom calls out, “Elena, are you ready?”

Before you can respond, Abigail yells, “Yes, coming,” and runs down the stairs, leaving you face-to-face with her reflection.

# Planes, Pain, and Automobiles

Anna Ross

Three hours and fifteen minutes until I am home.  
Twenty-two hours until I am putting on a black suit  
and driving to Church of Grace off of Redbank Road.  
Twenty-four hours until I am carrying the casket down  
the front steps of the church.

An orange light blinks in front of me. “Ladies  
and gentlemen, when the seat belt sign illuminates,  
please fasten your seat belt. Insert the metal fittings  
one into the other and tighten by pulling on the loose  
end of the strap. To release your seat belt, lift the  
upper portion of the buckle. We ask that you keep  
your seat belt fastened throughout the flight, as we may  
experience turbulence.” The flight attendant’s soft-  
spoken voice slowly sings me to sleep as the orange seat  
belt sign above my head begins to blur. I close my eyes,  
but all I can see is fiery hair.

~ ~ ~

Golden eyes and caramel hair. She sat across the fire  
pit swaying to the music I produced with a pick and  
old guitar. In a quiet voice, she sang along to David  
Wilcox’s “Eye of the Hurricane,” and her eyes were  
glued to the flames that stood between us. As I played  
the final chord, she cracked the slightest smile and held  
her gaze on mine just a bit longer than she intended  
because her cheeks turned red as she returned her eyes  
to the flames.

My best friend Daniel invited a group of friends up  
to his family’s cabin at Caesar’s Creek State Park for the  
night so we could celebrate his birthday. It was pretty  
much our rec soccer team and a couple of kids from his

youth group. His parents put three cases of Miller Light  
in the cooler outside and told us they would be upstairs  
if we needed anything. Needless to say, Daniel and I  
had a drink, tossed a football, and waited for everyone  
else to arrive.

When the sun went down, we all gathered around  
the fire and I played my mini acoustic set for anyone  
that cared enough to listen, and when I finished, I met  
Daniel by the cooler.

“Who is that girl over there? Brown hair, yellow  
shirt.” I asked.

“That’s Alyssa. She’ll be a Junior. I met her on  
our West Virginia mission trip two weeks ago. Super  
sweet. She’s a little shy at first but super nice.” I had a  
name and that was all I needed, so I grabbed a beer from  
the cooler and turned to walk back to the fire. Daniel  
quickly interrupted me, “Carter, ah. You probably  
don’t want to take that over there, assuming it’s for  
her.”

“What’s wrong with offering her a drink? We are all  
staying the night anyway.”

“Yeah. That’s not the problem. Come here.” In a  
hushed tone, Daniel told me, “Her dad is a recovering  
alcoholic, and she doesn’t really drink. She won’t get  
mad if you offer her a drink, but I figured I’d spare  
you both the awkward moment of you trying to start a  
conversation after she rejects your offer.” Daniel took  
the cold aluminum can from me and patted my shoulder  
to let me know that I was free to go.

I sat down next to her and introduced myself. She

complimented my mediocre music abilities, and we talked for another hour until everyone was ready to turn in for the night. Before she left in the morning, I mustered up enough courage to ask if she would want to hang out sometime, and luckily received a yes.

~ ~ ~

My train of thought is interrupted when the old man next to me asks, “Where are you going, son?”

“I uh—I’m headed home for a funeral, sir.”

“I am sorry to hear that. God bless you. The name’s George.”

“Carter, and thank you, sir. What about you—where are you headed?” I ask.

“I am on my way home from my sister-in-law’s house. My wife passed away four years ago—breast cancer—so every year on the anniversary of her passing I spend the weekend with her sister in our hometown.”

“I am sorry to hear about your wife sir. How long were y’all together?”

“She was my high school sweetheart. This summer we would have celebrated our fifty-seventh wedding anniversary, but it seems like just yesterday I was asking her to our high school dance.” He lets out a small chuckle, and a smile stretches across George’s face as he talks about his wife. “I showed up at her door with flowers, but I was too damn nervous to ring the bell. I was about to walk away when I heard her voice call my name, and she was walking up behind me. She looked at me and said, ‘It’s about time, I thought I was going to have to ask you myself.’ She was the love of my life.”

The flight attendant’s voice interrupts our conversation. “At this time, set your electronic devices to airplane mode until an announcement is made upon arrival.” My screen lights up as I swipe to press the airplane icon on my phone; I swipe down and catch her gaze. I haven’t changed my lock screen since we took that picture. Wavy brown hair drapes over her shoulders while I support her weight on my back. We both have smiles that illuminate our faces. She wears her favorite white t-shirt and baggy jeans. Not that she

remembers, but it was the same thing she wore on our first date; the night I realized I could love her.

~ ~ ~

It was late summer as the gentle sound of a cover band floated through the crisp air of downtown Carroll. We sat at the dinner table for an hour after we finished our meals trying to learn as much about each other’s lives as possible. She told me about her job at a small coffee shop, and how she cannot lie to her mother, and the nights she eats ice cream and dances around the living room to old Disney movies with her sister. I told her about my dad who taught me how to work with my hands and the way my dog likes to sit on me whenever she gets the chance, and that my friend had to drive me to meet her because my car broke down that morning.

Eventually, we made our way out of the restaurant and down the walkway illuminated by strings of lights. We walked slowly down the path until we stopped to listen to the cover band playing in the park. When I asked her to dance her cheeks turned red, and she warned me that she had two left feet, but she took my hand and swayed to the music. The warmth of her body pressed against mine, and I wished that song would never end. For a moment I forgot about the crowd of people around dancing, talking, and enjoying the music. When the song came to an end, she looked at me with a grin across her face and took my hand.

“What do you want to do now?” I asked.

“C’mon. I want to show you one of my favorite places down here.”

“Okay, but Daniel is coming to pick me up in fifteen minutes. Don’t have a car, remember?” Man, how I was kicking myself for not having a damn car.

“Well, if you want to stay a little longer, I can take you home.” So, I followed her down the path that led to the river. We walked up the bank until the trees opened up into a small grass plain. “Here we are. If you lie down here it is one of the best views of the night sky.”

I lowered myself next to her and directed my attention above while she pointed out the major

constellations.

“I like to come here when I need an escape, you know? Like when my dad sometimes falls off the wagon and I don’t know how to explain to my siblings why daddy has to go away for weeks at a time when he is in rehab.” She must have seen the look on my face because she immediately followed up with, “I know Daniel told you. It’s okay. I’m not ashamed of it, I just try to hide it from my younger siblings. They’re still so young and they still think the best of their father. He deserves the chance to try and live up to that one day.”

In my three years at Mariemont High School, I wondered how I hadn’t met her sooner. There I was, a guy who had no idea what was about to happen, lying next to a girl in an old white t-shirt and torn jeans, staring at the sky.

~ ~ ~

“That girl on your screen. She’s quite beautiful. Reminds me of my wife,” George says as my phone screen goes dark.

“Yeah. She is. I really love her,” I reply as a small smile forms on my face. “But I lost her.” There is a slight burning sensation in my eyes as I fight back the tears. I shut my eyes tightly and take a deep breath. This is not the place to get emotional. Humming from the plane engine tunes out the various noises from restless passengers around me. January air after a fresh snow blows in my face from a small vent above me. Chills roll down my spine as I twist the nozzle trying to stop the cool flow of air. Why are airplanes always so cold?

~ ~ ~

Snow piled up overnight in early January, enough for school to be called off for the day. At 11:00 am Alyssa walked through the front door with hot cocoa mix in hand, looking ready to sit and watch movies for a day. Halfway through the show snow started to fall, and Rudy jumped into Alyssa’s lap to let her know that she was ready to go outside. Rudy’s golden tail wagged back and forth, and she whined until we finally let her outside to play. The bitter cold of the snow nipped at my toes

through the fabric of my tennis shoes while Alyssa and I watched Rudy run through the white powder that coated the yard. *Puff.* A snowball collided with the back of my jacket and Alyssa stood behind me trying to look innocent. Before I knew it, snow was flying across my yard and Alyssa jumped on my back, taking us both down into the cold powder. I had not heard her laugh in weeks. After Christmas, her dad hit a slump and was struggling to stay sober, and Alyssa was stuck trying to support him once again.

When we got inside, we both stripped out of our wet clothes and threw them in the dryer. I tossed her old t-shirt and grey sweatpants that were two sizes too big, and we quickly threw the dry cloth over our freezing skin. Before I realized what was happening, she grabbed the towel I was using to dry my hair and set it aside.

“There is something I should tell you,” she said in a soft tone.

“What’s up?”

“I uh, I love you Carter. And don’t feel like you have to say it back, I just needed to get it out and—”

For weeks I had been trying to find a way to say those three words, but it never seemed to be the right time. My lips collided with hers and my hands found her cheeks that burned warm enough to melt the outside snow. When I pulled away, I looked into her eyes and said it back.

“I love you too.”

~ ~ ~

There is a clunking sound in the aisle, and I open my eyes to see two flight attendants dressed in purple with their hair perfectly tied back rolling the drink cart towards me.

“Can I get you two gentlemen anything to drink?”

“Could I have a ginger ale please?” The short blonde pours my drink into a plastic cup half-filled with ice and hands it over to me. “Thank you so much.”

“I’ll have the same,” George responds. With some force the flight attendants move the cart to the next pod of seats, only disturbing a few sleeping passengers on the way.

“Cheers.” George and I clink our plastic cups and take a sip. “You said that you lost this girl of yours, but if you love her like you say you do, maybe you haven’t really lost her.”

“Believe me, I am too late.”

“It’s never too late to start fighting.”

“Thanks, George,” I solemnly reply. Being careful not to spill, I take a sip of my drink and place it on the plastic tray in front of me. Silently, I watch as the bubbles stuck to the side of the clear plastic make their way through the golden liquid and surface for air.

~ ~ ~

It was a Friday night, February twenty-eighth to be exact, when I opened the letter. I mean, I had gotten the email the day before letting me know that I had been accepted, but this was different. In my hand, I held my ticket out of Carroll, Iowa.

“Dear Carter Lakin,

Congratulations! It is with great pleasure that I offer you admission to the Penn State University class of 2019.” I sped through the letter searching for any indication of financial aid, and there it was. “You qualified for our Discover Penn State financial award of \$28,000 over four years. There will be a—”

Alyssa threw her arms around my neck and kissed my cheek. Both of my parents joined in the hug and then my dad popped a bottle of champagne. Alyssa poured us each a glass and got herself a cup of water. We raised our glasses of bubbling golden liquid to the sky in celebration of the past four years finally paying off in the best way possible. Penn State had been my dream since freshman year of high school, and at that moment, it became a reality.

As the celebration died down, my parents turned in

for the night, and Alyssa and I walked back to my room. The excitement started to wear off because we both realized that this letter meant we had a big conversation in front of us.

After I closed the door, Alyssa wrapped her arms around my neck, looked in my eyes, and said, “I know we need to talk about this, but before we do, I need to tell you that I am so incredibly proud of you.”

We sat on my bed that night and talked through all the possibilities. She told me that I had worked too hard at this opportunity to pass it up now. I suggested that Alyssa could apply to Penn State next year when the time came around, and then it would only be a year of long-distance, but she told me that she needed to stay close for her family. Her dad had worked too hard to stay sober for her to leave. Long-distance was an option, but neither of us knew how we would afford the plane tickets, and by the time one of us drove to the other we would have to turn around and drive home. We talked through all the options, and then we cried a lot. Come August, we would have to say our goodbye.

~ ~ ~

“Ladies and gentlemen, as we start our descent to Des Moines International Airport, please make sure your seat backs and tray tables are in their upright position. Make sure your seat belt is securely fastened and all carry-on luggage is stowed in the overhead compartments or underneath the seat in front of you.” The flight attendant’s voice echoes throughout the plane, and the two ladies walk up the aisle checking that everything is clear.

I look over at George, with his grey hair and wrinkled skin. He seems so happy, despite losing his wife. “George, what did you do in your life? Like, where did you work?”

“I served in the army for twenty years before my wife and I decided to put down roots in one spot. It wasn’t fair to keep moving her and our daughter around

all the time, and it wasn't fair with me being gone so much. So, I went back to school and became a history teacher. Taught history at a school outside of Des Moines for thirty-five years."

"How did you do it? How did you make your marriage work when you were gone so much?"

"Well, we always had a plan to end the distance. I would serve for twenty-five years and at that point we would have saved enough money to settle somewhere. When my second child was born, I decided that it was time to leave earlier than I thought. My family became more important. I loved my wife and children, and I fought for them every day, and that was enough."

I loved Alyssa, but I did not fight for her. I walked away.

~ ~ ~

My eyes burned from the tears as I dug my head into her shirt. I could feel her heart beating fast and her breath shortening. She was crying too, but I could not bring myself to look in her eyes. In that moment, I was breaking her heart as well as my own because it was the easy way out for us. No flights back and forth, no trying to find time to talk, no constantly worrying about the other. My chest felt like it was closing in on itself and my throat tightened so I could not get a word out of it.

Eventually, I lifted my head from the tear stain I formed on her shirt, and we sat across from one another in the same spot she took me to on our first date. Her hands were warm as they cupped my cheeks. Gently she wiped the tears streaming down my cheeks and she kissed me for the last time.

I couldn't stand to see her like this, so I told her, "If I stay here any longer, I am just going to keep crying, so I think I need to go now."

She looked at me with a red face and her golden, puffy eyes and said, "I understand. You are going to do such amazing things, and I am so proud of you. God, I love you so much."

"I love you too," I said as I hugged her one last time.

When I got home that night my mom held me in her arms, and I cried until there were no tears left. My heart ached inside my chest, and there was nothing I could do to make the pain go away. The next morning, I got in the car and headed east.

~ ~ ~

"George, do you regret it, being with the same woman since high school? I mean, do you ever feel like you missed out on anything?"

George chuckles and responds to me, "Not one thing. My wife was and still is, the best thing to ever happen to me. I wouldn't trade one minute of the time we had together for the world."

"Yeah, that's what I thought," I say, knowing that all I want is another minute with Alyssa. "Thanks."

My stomach drops as the plane gets closer and closer to the ground. When I step off this plane I can't run anymore. The wheels make contact with the ground beneath us and the plane rattles as it speeds forward. I plant my feet on the floor like it will make a difference. This piece of metal is rolling at full speed and if it doesn't stop, well then it doesn't stop. Maybe then I will know what it felt like when her car hit the barrier on the side of the highway. Maybe then I will understand what she felt before the car flipped twice, landing upside down in the middle of the road. By the time the ambulance showed up, it was too late. They said she died on impact.

~ ~ ~

It was 1:30 am when I got the call. I was celebrating with the swim team after we won our first meet of the season the previous weekend. A few drinks in and I was not thinking straight. Never would I have said those things to her sober, or at least that is what I told myself. For

the fourth time since I started school, she was calling me, and the first time was the only time she was sober. Each call hit a little harder than the last. It was mid-October and we were still breaking each other's hearts. I swiped across my phone screen to answer her call.

"Alyssa, what's up? Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. I'm totally fine," she said in the high-pitched voice she used when she was excited. "I just wanted to say that I really miss you. When are you coming home?" The words rolled off her tongue in a jumbled mess.

"Have you been drinking?" My friends back home told me that she started going out and drinking with them after I left. At first it was fun, and she was everyone's new favorite pong partner, but then her dad relapsed. All of a sudden, she went from drinking for fun to drinking to blackout, drinking to forget. The girl they told me about was not the same girl I left behind, and I could feel my heart ache for her each time she called. All I wanted to do was hold her and tell her that everything was going to be okay, but I couldn't. I was just another guy who disappointed her.

"I still love you."

"Alyssa, you can't call me anymore. I met someone else." *Click*. She could never lie, even when she was drunk, but I could. I put my phone back in my pocket and took another shot, hoping it would erase the phone call.

~ ~ ~

The plane starts to slow down, but not enough for me to feel comfortable. My entire body tenses and my throat feels like it is closing in on itself—the same reaction I had when I got the call. My friends told me that she stormed out angry and crying, and she didn't tell anyone where she was going. What we know now is that she got in her old Passat and drove west on I-75. Her speedometer read 85, then 90, and the red dial kept turning until it hit 105. Then it was over. She swerved off the road and into the concrete barrier wall on the

side of the highway. No one knows where she was going, but it was not too hard to figure out; the accident happened two exits away from Caesar's Creek. The place we met. Why else would she have gone east, when her house and friends, and the rest of her life, was west?

I press my feet harder into the ground like it makes a difference, and I shut my eyes to hold back the flood of tears welling up behind my eyes. Maybe this is what I deserve. If this plane doesn't stop then I don't have to get off and face the truth. I won't have to walk down the streets of downtown Carroll where we spent our weekends or stand in the room where I told her I loved her. I won't have to face our friends, and I won't have to face her parents. If this doesn't stop, I'll get what I deserve.

"What's the girl's name? The one you're so torn up about?" George asks.

"Her name's Alyssa."

"Ah—Alyssa," he repeats with a gentle smile across his face. "That was my wife's name." George lets a sigh escape his lips and continues, "Now remember what I told you son: it's never too late to start fighting. You get off this plane and you tell Alyssa that your new friend George says hi, okay? And then you tell her that you are still in love with her, and you fight for her this time. You hear me?"

The plane continues to slow down. I take a deep breath.

"Yes sir, I will."

# The Artist's Prerogative

Gracie Nordgren

His name was Pietro Ludivicci, and he was in love with symmetry.

Those statues of his were carved with a delicate accuracy, angels and saints poised to bless or condemn, their pale faces set in expressions of aloof piety. That marble virgin of his was housed inside the chapel, the object of awe among the townspeople. For the sculptor had rendered the stone folds of her clothing as soft-looking as fabric.

The flawless beauty of Ludivicci's creations was rivaled only by the appearance of the sculptor himself. With his tight dark curls, regal nose, cherubic lips, and mahogany eyes, it was as if he were the personification of the suppleness of youth. Such perfection seemed celestial, inhuman. How lovely, this Pietro!

Of course, the young women of the town were hopelessly taken with him. Why, even the mayor's wife fondly referred to him as her first love! A cacophony of tokens, flowers, letters, and gifts took up permanent residence outside his door. In the marketplace, women would tarry and stare, and those bold enough to proposition him always received the same answer: a curl of the lip, and a flat "I'd rather not." You see, Ludivicci was a paramour of human beauty—and perfection his muse. How could he settle for anything less in a lover?

These harsh rejections were hard on the ladies of the town. Many would weep, some would pull at their hair. Young Viola, who cleaned the sculptor's apartment, witnessed countless of these spurnings. In the smoky bars, her father, the innkeeper, and the older

townsmen would snidely remark that Ludivicci may as well wed one of his statues.

There came a day, as the harvest-season came round, that the sculptor unexpectedly stopped accepting commissions. For seventeen days on end, he vanished from the eyes of the community. Circulating whispers suggested illness, or even his death. Viola of course knew that the artist was not dead at all. He had thrown himself into his newest project.

Ludivicci the recluse remained shut up in his apartment, his door opening only to receive the bread and wine he paid Viola to purchase for him. During these visits, the girl caught glimpses of a form standing in the center of his room—a new statue, perhaps? Alas, she could never get a good enough look, as the sculptor would pay her what was owed and then slam the door with a force that made its frame creak.

The longer Pietro Ludivicci was in isolation, the more fanciful the rumors about him became. He had certainly lost his sanity, most agreed. Signora Columbo swore she had spotted him at the temple, worshipping the pagan gods! How could he have fallen so far? Poor Pietro! A red-cheeked and mortified Viola confessed to her sister as they lay in bed one night that she had caught the sculptor cradling what seemed to be the face of his passion project and kissing its lips!

Months passed before Ludivicci was spotted in public again. He looked certainly worse for wear, with dark shadows underneath his eyes, an unkempt beard, his shoulder-length hair hanging in an unruly tangle.

His sculpting seemed to be abandoned as a thing of the past, as he had emerged from his isolation with nothing to show for it. If one would catch him walking about in town or marketplace and inquire about his work, he would stare back with haunted, glassy eyes and mutter something about having more important matters to pursue.

No one quite knew where the woman had come from. The way the innkeeper told it, she had knocked upon the inn's door late one night (the night before Ludivicci returned to society) and requested residence. Said her name was Giana Aldi. She had paid him handsomely for room and board from a fine leather coin purse that hung from her waist. She was a painter, this woman, who wished to work undisturbed within the rooms. *Why is it that this town is the place of so many fussy artists?* The innkeeper bemoaned to his wife and daughters as they, dazed and recently roused from sleep, stumbled to prepare a room.

Soon enough, the town forgot their fascination with Ludivicci in favor of the mysterious Giana Aldi. It was as if she had been carved from marble, as such flawlessness seemed unnatural. Smooth dark locks flowed down her back to her waist and large black eyes were framed by heavy lashes. They seemed to see into one's heart, and one couldn't help but feel naked and exposed under her gaze.

She was stern and dedicated to her art with a borderline religious fervour. Her neighbors took notice, with news of her traveling within hours. Who was she? Perhaps she and Ludivicci would be the perfect match for one another. Two kindred spirits, parallel in looks and practice.

Evidently, Ludivicci was enthralled by her as well. Every evening, he would stand at her balcony, wildly waving bouquets of flowers, imploring her to come down and speak to him. No one ever saw Giana Aldi do so much as open her window. Late into the night, the sculptor would cry, shout, and even sing love poetry! *Per favore! Bella ragazza! Per favore!* Poor Ludivicci

was in such a state of ruin by the seventh night, yet he persisted. Having enough of this, the innkeeper accosted him on the street, ordering him to give it up at once! Ludivicci, likely emboldened by the wine running through his body, declared that he would never stop his pursuit until he heard word from the lady herself.

It is said, and there have been several witnesses to this, that Giana Aldi had appeared on the balcony then. Leaning over its edge, raven hair spilling over her shoulders, her disdainful shout could be heard by all:

“I'd rather not!”