

## Aurora Borealis

Aurora spits one tooth and then another into the hand in front of her. She tongues the slot where the teeth used to be, where only unplugged wires hang to remind her of empty space. Knowing that a piece of her is gone trumps the pain, even when she touches the twin dimples in her arm where her mouth hit upon impact.

“A soft curve can be a good thing.” The man holding the teeth rolls them around in his hand like they’re dice he’s making sure aren’t loaded. “If it’d been tighter I might be holding arms and legs right now. I’ve seen it happen more than once.” His lips barely show between a matted tangle of beard when he speaks. He rubs his hands on his vest that is already shellacked with something like oil. Somehow he kept his bike upright even though she flew off the back.

A car slows coming around the corner, shoots them with its high beams, seems to pause momentarily and proceeds down the road.

“All things considered it ain’t so bad.” He clenches the teeth in his palm and shakes them. “I had a brother who lost his whole set on a curb outside Reno about ten years back.”

“What happened to him?” She tries to harden her voice, to pinch it into something tough but she knows it comes out as little more than a whimper.

“We got to calling him Joker after that. Like Jack Nicholson in the Batman movie that’d just come out? Funny thing is, the bastard never smiled. Maybe he did once, but it didn’t happen much.” He kneels, uncurls her fingers and drops the teeth back into her hand. She knows he won’t apologize. Even though they’re a hundred miles past the Badlands and even further from familiar earshot, this man does not issue apologies.

In the single glare of his motorcycle headlight behind him, Aurora can see the man now; his ruddy skin beaten by wind, his bloated forearms hieroglyphic with smeared tattoos. After the troopers outside the BP rest stop threatened to arrest her for hitchhiking, it didn’t matter who picked her up really. She almost ran to hug the biker when he slowed to her and introduced himself as Muddy. Maybe that’s what he’s waiting as they face each other in the light of his chopper.

Something is crusted over his boots and jeans. Maybe that’s where his name stemmed from. Aurora feels silly for humming *Hoochie Coochie Man* while she gripped his back and inhaled the entrenched rot of his jacket.

“Nothing broke, is it?” He says.

“I don’t think so,” she manages to say.

He reaches his hand down. A tattoo says MARY in the webbing between his thumb and forefinger. She grips his leather bracelets as he effortlessly hoists her up. "Boy you'd know it if something was broke. I've broken just about everything."

Here she is. Here is Aurora, going out west on her own.

Aurora still carries the same dog-eared, sun-toasted copy of *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* that she bought at Goodwill for a quarter back in high school. She would follow Sissy Henkshaw out west or wherever to become a cowgirl or whatever. It didn't take a whole lot more for her to leave, at least nothing that she would tell anyone.

A couple years later she is washing her mouth at a Waffle House. She uses iodine he had given her on the cuts on her arms. They aren't so bad but her mouth hurts. It keeps leaking blood. It is caked between the beads of a necklace she had wrapped around her wrist. She kept it after a Mardi Gras party at The Shady Pines Trailer Park where she had been living as a reminder of why she left. She thinks about throwing away but rinses it off the best she can instead.

"I know you got some beer in here," she can hear Muddy say from beyond the door. "What about some whiskey for my little friend then. You can see she's in sorts."

"We do not," a woman responds to him. "You ain't getting liquored in here. She doesn't even look the proper age."

Aurora runs the water. She's not sure what she's expecting but when she turns it off, all she can hear is the clatter of dishes from the kitchen. Blood hangs in a film in the back of her throat. It tastes as if it's been there for days. She can relish the pain. She sucks on it, gives it breadth. She imagines making a necklace from the teeth. Maybe she would give it to Muddy.

There is a knock at the door. It's time to go. Aurora rinses her face.

On the way out, she hears someone mutter something about road trash blowing in. Nobody else says anything as they leave.

The closest place Muddy finds for a drink is some sort of gambling parlor tucked into a strip-mall where people push nickels into slots and peck fingers at glowing buttons. He has bought a pair of whiskies. Aurora is hesitant to drink hers but worries more about his reaction if she doesn't.

They're sitting beneath a Keno monitor and Muddy sighs. He then raises his voice to say that gambling is a waste of time and money loud enough so an overweight man approaching the bar for a drink can hear him and be gently persuaded to sit down again.

“They had a bar back at that place,” Muddy says. “I saw those two rednecks at the end of the counter sucking them down.” He seems stuck on this now. A bit of the liquor spills over his chin when he takes a drink.

The whiskey burns her throat but it singes her gums. Each exposed nerve vibrates in throngs of pain. She sets her palms against the bar and braces herself.

Muddy raises a fresh shot. “You’ve taken this better than the toughest lady I could imagine,” he says.

Aurora tries to smile but sucks her gums and tongues the empty space.

“The more of ‘em you suck down, the easier it’s going to be. I promise you that.” He turns his forearms over on the bar, and glares to the bartender who pours a fresh shot. “They got no right pushing us down the road at that joint. Don’t ever let someone put you down like that.”

There is something Aurora should say here, something charming or affable but she can’t think of anything appropriate. Instead, she thanks him and takes down another shot. This one goes down easier.

“You get tossed off my chopper and thank me for it. How’s that?”

“Nobody helped me out much before, I guess.”

“That’s why I had a club years back. I had some good brothers too. Thick, thin and all that shit in-between. All of it goes away.”

Aurora brings her bag from the floor and sets it on the bar. “I had a brother but I didn’t talk to him much. He had some other shit going on. My mom had him real young.” She removes an envelope from her bag and from it, on eggshell paper, her birth certificate. “I’m pretty confident they won’t miss me a whole lot. Only thing to keep record of who I am is in this bag.”

Muddy takes the piece of paper from her and seems to study it. “This only means something if you want it to,” he says.

“I really don’t care about it. It doesn’t mean anything to me.” She takes the piece of paper back, holds a lighter underneath it and, once a flame fans up, she drops it into an ashtray.

“Some things don’t burn away girlie. They just don’t,” Muddy says. “They hang on.”

The bar closes at midnight but the bartender shuts down the machines and the televisions early and the place goes quiet. This is easier than asking the drunken biker and the underage girl to leave.

“Can we get something for the road there chief?” Muddy leaves a twenty on the bar and empties the ashtray into his palm. He seems surprised when the man returns moments later with change and a bottle of Jim Beam.

“You’ll be moving on then?” It sounds more like a plea from the bartender than a question.

“We’ll be out of here when we’re ready,” Aurora says and begins to rise and lead Muddy out of the bar.

After Muddy starts the bike, he dumps the ashes from his hand onto the ground. Aurora is hitched tighter to him now. She will not be thrown again.

Along the highway, Aurora can make out elk, their eyes small pricks of light just beyond the wire fences off the road. After only a few miles, he downshifts, slows the bike and moves off to the shoulder.

Aurora considers removing herself from the bike and running before he has stopped completely. Scenarios begin to compute. There is nothing else out here but the elk and the hills out there that press up against the moon like bodies slumped over.

Dirt kicks up under the bike but, with certain grace, he maneuvers it off the road. When they have almost reached the hills, he pumps the clutch again and lets it idle before dismounting.

Crickets snap in the burrs once he has shut the engine off, leaving its light on.

“What are we doing?” Aurora holds her bag close to her while Muddy moves outside the small tunnel of light.

From what she can see, he seems to cover his eyes from the light. “What do you mean?”

Aurora is certain she will never see the road again. She thinks of the things she has packed: two pairs of underwear, an old sweatshirt with holes she burrowed out with her thumbs, a notebook for writing down her thoughts, some photos she’d torn from magazines of places he was sure she’d now never see. The bottle of whiskey is in there too. She takes that by its throat, unsure whether to remove it or not. What would happen of her is this is the last place she ever sees? At least she had made it this far.

“Will you pass me the whiskey, girlie?” Muddy calls out. She can make out his bulk out there in the shadow moving around like one of the elk in the bramble.

As he moves back into the light, Aurora can see the red mud crusted on his boots and jeans. She does not blame this man for what he does. It’s in his nature, she assumes. Just like the accident; these things happen.

He takes the bottle from her and steps away again, out of the light, leaving only the tinny motor of a swarm of flies. “How’d you get your name?” He says.

“Which one?”

“The one you told me,” Muddy says.

"I read about it in *National Geographic* in high school: The Aurora Borealis." An unexpected confidence washes through her as she says this.

"You mean you never seen it?"

She allows silence to answer that for her.

Muddy crosses through the light again and sets down the bottle down on a rock. He then reaches into the waistband of his jeans and removes something else, something metal and sets that down with the bottle.

Piss falls to the earth like wet sand through a timer. She tries not to watch as he finishes and adjusts himself. She tries not to imagine what will happen next. As she looks away she can hear only the soft clomp of his boots on the earth and the whiskey sloshing up the sides of the bottle

"You know, I've seen it once," he says even though she is looking away.

Aurora opens her eyes to see the bottle sitting on the ground before her.

"You go up far enough north about now you can see 'em too. That's how I did: on a ride up into Canada we did before the law was touchy about such things. It's like liquid electricity. It was something else, girlie. You chose a good thing to call yourself by." Leather and joints creak and snap as he lowers himself to the ground. His gun sits across the clearing from him. He seems to pay it no mind at all. He just sits with his legs crossed, waiting for her to pass the bottle back to him.

"How did you get your name?" She sees a child sitting before her, now as he belches and excuses himself.

"Oh that's no thing. Just came from a night of drinking. I guess I took some pills too. Came too wet and muddy as a dog. Name stuck as names do."

Aurora tries to take another drink before passing the bottle but plugs the bottle with her lips.

"What are we doing here?"

"I just wanted to sit and have a drink. Not much more to it. Can't really just hang by the road and do that. I didn't want to get too far out of that town we went through a bit back either." Muddy lies down on his back and stares to the sky. "Now why don't you go on up there and check out those Northern Lights?"

"I don't have much money," Aurora says. "I got enough to get me to California and that's about all." If she lies down, in the shadow, she could mistake Muddy's body for one of those hills. "I want to see as much as I can though."

"Isn't that the point though? To see as much as you can?"

"That's what I want to do," Aurora says.

Aurora stands and stretches her arms to the sky. She brings him the bottle of whiskey and almost crosses the clearing for the gun but stops short.

“Go on, hold it,” Muddy says. “You’re out here on your own, you damn sure can handle a pistol.”

Aurora takes it in her hands and holds it like a porcelain urn.

“Takes a bit of getting used to,” Muddy says. “Good thing to have if you’re the nomadic kind. Sometimes it’s something you need.”

As Muddy finishes most of the bottle over the next hour he tells her of jail in Tulsa and San Antonio. He tells her he was married once but his wife disappeared to Mexico. He tells of her of crisscrossing the country, most of which he’s forgotten because he never stays anywhere for too long anymore. He tells her of a place just like this where he sucked Rattlesnake venom from a brother’s leg.

Aurora listens, devours all of it and files it away so she might tell it again later.

By the time they’ve gone through the whole bottle, Aurora no longer cares about the space between her teeth or the wounds in her gums. She only cares about moving, about staying in motion. It doesn’t bother her either when Muddy slips the gun back into his belt, sits down on the chopper and slaps the leather seat behind him. She just grabs her bag, hops on and a moment later they’re gliding back onto the highway the same direction they’d come from.

Tiny pinches of bug and debris snap at Aurora’s bare ankles so she learns to use Muddy’s body as a shield. She leans into the curves, hunkers down, allows the steel to pulse beneath her like a living thing. The cool air whips her hair back and her shirt billows up but she has her bag secured, locked into herself so she will not lose it.

It could be an hour but it probably wasn’t. Aurora has gotten so comfortable that she thinks she might be able to sleep with her face resting on Muddy’s back like that. The road has a calming effect and her body meets it reflexively so that it takes a moment to realize they were slowing, slowing and pulling over.

Aurora smells the canola oil like the air has been fluffed with corn starch and slapped onto a griddle. There is the sign, the waxy yellow box letters high enough so she could see them from far down the highway had she been looking.

Muddy pulls the bike over to the side of the building, where the wall is brick instead of glass. He dismounts and extends his hand like he is asking for a dance. “Now, how about that drink?” He says.

Even though that Aurora can sense the weight of the situation in some piece of her, she still feels her legs moving, one after the other, light and airy as foam, into the restaurant behind him.

Before the woman can reach for the phone, Muddy holds up his gun so that she, the cook and the three customers can plainly see it. It must be the same woman from before. She does not seem afraid but expectant. She must be what holds this place together.

“Just go on slurping down that grease and you’ll do just fine,” Muddy says. “Me and the lady just came back to have our rightful drink.”

The woman rubs her palms on her apron. She doesn’t move again until Muddy specifies what they will be drinking.

Muddy leans forward like he might share a secret with her. “Now, of course you know that I’ll be taking all the money you got in that register.” He leans back and quixotically inhales nearly a whole bottle of beer before drinking his shot. “My mom worked in a shithole like this so you keep those tips if you got any.” He points to the beer cooler with his gun and motions for another.

Aurora keeps turning toward the window but Muddy doesn’t seem worried. He is intent on staying to finish another beer. Unsure of how to speak or what to say, “Aurora removes the book from her back and flips through its pages. Nothing registers even though she recognizes each page, sentence and word but she needs to harness her attention to something.

“That book must be something else,” Muddy says. “Looks like it’s seen some weather.” He leans over, props up the book with his thumb so that he can see its cover and nods like he might recognize it. “You need some new books to read.” He slams a fist on the counter like this is a declaration of war.

“I like old things,” she says. “Old things have more meaning.”

The restaurant is still. No cups rise to lips. No forks clink onto plates.

The two sip their drinks in quiet until Muddy speaks again. “Things used to have meaning all right,” he says. He eyes his glass of whiskey with vague skepticism before drinking it down and his attention sparks like he now notices the money on the counter and he mashes it into a misshapen wad before stuffing it into the inside of his vest. “Time to go, Girlie.”

Aurora almost falls over when she follows his cue to stand. Every piece of her seems to be going in a separate direction. She can see that Muddy still has the gun out, backing out of the place, opening the door behind him and holding the door for her as she scatters outside.

He might say something, might offer something more than a wave of his hand to, once again, hop on the back. She knows there isn’t another option. The only choice is to leave with him again. And so she boards the heaving bike, grips his chest and, once again, they are gone.

It might be an hour later. It might be more. Aurora has been expecting the police, or something, to stop them but they have continued the push down empty road. It is just outside a town, just a thorny rim of lights speckling out there, that Muddy stops the bike. He nods off to the hills, to the right, where the first hint of morning is seeping over the hills in a bruised rim. "You're going to go off in this town up here and get a Greyhound or something to take you up north there to see those lights," Muddy says. He reaches into his vest and hands over the money from the diner. "It ain't all that much but it will give you enough padding so you can do that and still go off and make a stake or whatever you got to do."

Aurora takes the money and holds it in front of her. It might not be much, only two hundred or so, but it's more than she's ever held before. Unsure of what to do, she reaches into her pocket, takes her two teeth and gives them one more shake in her fist before handing them over.

Muddy laughs and pushes them away. "Those are you. You keep all parts of you," he says. "You want to give me something, why don't you hand over that book you think so much of?"

Of course she can get another copy anywhere. This copy she knows. It was familiar. But right now, it doesn't have any value at all for her. Without more thought, she hands it over.

"Even better," Muddy said. "Something to keep me stimulated." He nods toward the town. "Think you can hitch your way in?" He sighs. "I got a bad feeling about the law if I head in there."

Aurora could walk. It could have only been a couple miles. But maybe, she'd stick out her thumb.

"You shouldn't have any trouble," he says, kicking the bike alive again as dust sifts up his jeans. "It should be the right time of year too."

For a moment, as the bike shudders, Aurora wonders if she will ever see him again and then he raises his hand, a wave goodbye, and that is it. Her legs feel sturdy. The morning is coming on. Today she will hitch north because that is what she had promised to do. Today she will go to see with realize her name.