

BLACK AND WHITE

FEBRUARY 64'

“It’s crisp out.” Those are the words the boy heard from his mother as he flew off the steps. Those charming words, although succinct, carried a melodious charm. See, his mother was charming and her voice... well, melodious. She had an air about her, a girlish kind; her face revealed no solemnity, yet it did not reveal the utter jubilation a young girl would possess. That natural glow had faded, and the crooks of her mouth began to slope downward. For a simple description; she was kind.

She waved goodbye to her son, and with one last cautionary glance, she closed the door. To her, it was frighteningly cold outside. It was the kind of chill that hangs in the air and slowly surrounds you. Even when she had stepped inside, she found that her wool sweater and the dimming fire did not seem to keep her warm enough. Perhaps, it was the damp towel loosely wrapped around her head that gave her this unending chill and not the raw air. She moved on to the kitchen- she did not feel anxiety here- where she did not feel as cold. She simply fried her eggs and smoked her cigarette in between turns with the spatula and her coffee. This was her routine; puff, flip, puff, stir, and reminding herself to exhale and inhale normally.

They lived in a charming house on the corner of Westbrook Avenue and Drider Street in a quaint and, frankly, boring town in Upstate New York, just a 3 hour train ride to the city. It was a wide ranch-style house, with a bright red brick wrapping around, and a black sloped roof. Large shrubs crowded the front walk and in spring, yellow tulips adorned the garden. There was a dusting of snow covering the walk that she had neglected to shovel off, or more so refused to. But just as she was thinking, she heard a wrap at the door. Then, with a quick and mumbled, “*HOLD ON,*” she turned off the stove with the cigarette dangly loosely from her stained lips. She took one more inhale and exhale as she ran to the door. With the most extreme sense of urgency, she flung it open.

“Uh ya, hi there, *Ms. Watson!*” It was a loud hello so early in the morning. It was from the next door neighbor Fredrick. Fredrick was the neighborhood “boy.” He was kind, never once heard speaking a vulgar word and always there before you asked. His freckled face, short brown hair and blue eyes made him an instant companion to many. Ms. Watson found his unannounced knock that morning to be rather annoying, especially when she heard an emphasized “*ms.*” “Oh yes, hi Fred, aren’t you supposed to be on your way to school now, dear?” said Ms. Watson as she puffed her cigarette with a forced smile. She had a way with the word dear; it was a part of her airy disposition to finish most sentences with it. To others, they viewed this word as belonging with Ms. Watson; terminally attached.

“Yes I am, Ms. Watson, ma’am. But my mother wanted me to come over before and shovel your walkway.”

“Oh really Fred, dear that’s not necessary, I can take care of it, it’s just light snow fall. Head off to school.”

Fred seemed disappointed that he could not be of assistance, shrugged his shoulders, and said a pleasant, “have a good day there Ms. Watson.” And with that, he ran off down the sidewalk with a slip or two along the way.

Ms. Watson cringed at the “Ms.” again, and with the same urgency as she had opened the door, she shut it. She stood in her foyer for a moment, a puff here and there from her slow burning cigarette. White tile lined the foyer and a plain wall paper met it at an oak trim. She had one print on the wall to the left of the door that she was particularly proud of; an ocean scene she had ferociously fought for at an auction. She continued to stand there, enjoying the warmth of her tattered rug beneath her feet, and the glow from her cigarette. She was contemplating when she would weather the daunting task of shoveling her walk. Just then the phone rang, a rather shrieking ring, in fact. The kind of ring that makes you simply not want to pick up the phone. She took her time walking there saying, “I’m coming! I’m coming!” under her breath until she got to the pink plastic phone.

“Hell-“

“ALICE! Darling, why didn’t you call me back yesterday?” Her mother’s voice carried through the phone into the living room, as if the phone was not necessary.

“Mother, because, because I am fine, I have to scurry now dear, I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” Alice heard her mother say “but Alice...” as she continued to drop the phone onto the carrier. She pressed the butt into the glass ash tray on the side table beside the phone and walked back to the kitchen as she remembered her eggs. She sat down with her fried eggs and a tall glass of water and relaxed. She looked out her picture window and went over a tiny checklist of things to do. As most days lately, there was hardly anything to do aside from menial cleaning tasks. She sighed, a big deep rooted sigh, took a sip of water and appreciated the coolness rushing down her throat.

Several hours later, the boy returned home to a clean, cold house that continued to hold the same chill in the air and smoggy ceilings. He walked in vibrantly, adding the only light to the house. He called to his mom as he dropped his books on the counter. Alice walked out of her room with rollers built upon her head, which looked quite funny compared to the size to her slim and delicate face.

“Oh, hi there Ben, dear.”

“Hi mom.” Ben replied as he surveyed her head. It was odd for him to see curlers in her hair at such an early time of the day.

A smile grew on Alice’s face and her thin lips spread, “Now dear, what do you want for dinner? Is there anything you want?” she leaned on the counter, looking at her son with an adoring gaze whilst puffing on her fourth cigarette of the day. “Well, I suppose I’d love a steak and your

famous mashed potatoes,” his voice fading as he walked into his bedroom. Alice raising her voice responded, “Why, I suppose that’s very possible dear!”

And on that note, Alice walked around the counter and pulled out one large steak and one smaller from the fridge. She rinsed off the steaks, lit the stove, and proceeded to fry the steaks. As the sizzle came from the stove, Alice opened the cabinet beside the sink and pulled out a depleted bottle of Black and White, pouring it on the rocks into a small glass. She took a sip here and there and listened to the sizzle of the steaks and the clink of the ice against the glass and watched her cigarette fizzle out in her favorite ash tray on the table. The smoke carrying into the air was hypnotizing. She watched the twirls and twists of the smoke as she sipped. Then, the steaks began to sizzle beyond control, and as she scooped them onto a plate, she called for her son. As she did this, she remembered that she had forgotten the mashed potatoes; a special request. She threw the steaks onto the plate quickly and grabbed two russet potatoes, throwing them into a pot and hoped they would be done before the steaks were actually consumed.

Ben sat down with the disappointment of seeing that there were not any potatoes on his plate; see, it was not the one potato that irked him, rather the cumulative effect. “I am sorry dear, I was just on another planet, I swear. They will be ready in just a minute, no worries now dear.” She said this with a humble laugh as she picked up the two plates and her glass of scotch. A little of it splashed as she placed her drink down on the blue Formica table. Ben grabbed his chair and swung it around, sitting down to the one steak on a plain plate. Seeing there was not a glass full of milk all ready for him he jumped up and helped himself. Upon seeing her son jump up, Alice said with a breath of attempt, “Oh no, dear what’s wrong? Can I grab you something, dear?”

“Oh no, ma, I’m just going to get a glass of milk...”

“Oh, you know honey, I just completely forgot about that, sit down dear, I’ll grab that.” This time an embarrassing laugh slipped from an uncomfortable smile. Alice placed the glass of cold milk down along with some salt and pepper for the steaks, and sat down with her son.

She leaned slightly on the table as she asked her son about his day’s happenings.

“So tell me Ben dear, did you speak to that darling girl today?” An airy smile seeped through as she took a sip of the scotch and swallowed her steak, which was noticeably dry and practically fried to a crisp.

“Oh um no, she was simply just some doll that the guys and I liked to look at. You know, she bobbed her hair a while ago so... you know...”

“Well now I certainly don’t think that’s an acceptable reason to stop liking a darling girl such as her.”

Awkward silence filled the kitchen as they both chewed the tough steak. The pot started to clang and Alice was reminded of the potatoes.

“Oops! Hold on a minute dear, the potatoes are ready.”

She served up the barely mashed boiled potatoes to Ben, who once again looked disappointedly at the prepared food.

Alice saw this look.

“Dear... is there something wrong? Would you like butter?”

“Oh no, jeez mother it’s swell... but you know I was going to cut out before it got too dark so I could skate with some of the boys and do homework.”

“Oh, um, ok, well you uh, you go now.”

Ben hopped up and grabbed his coat and walked out the door without skates and without homework.

She watched him, his head hung low and his hands pushed deep into his fur lined coat pockets while he walked further and further down the side walk.

Alice saw this and knew. She looked at the table and knew. There was half of a crispy steak and cold mashed potatoes and nothing but a couple of drops of lukewarm milk in his glass. With two more sips, she sat down at the table alone and looking at her son’s plate. She sat there. Sad. In silence. Alone.

She lit another cigarette and finished her scotch at a surprisingly quick rate and poured herself a glass of cool water to chase the burn. She collected the dirty dishes and threw out the steaks and the potatoes, placing the dishes in the sink, letting them clink. She walked away toward the phone. Placing the needle on Pat Boone’s “April Love,” she swayed as she lit a cigarette. As she smoked, she closed her eyes and slowly unraveled her curlers to let her delicate blonde hair fall and sway along her hips.

JULY 63’

Smiled. They smiled. They smiled at each other as they drove along the coast of Massachusetts. It was a stereotype they were fulfilling. Her hair locked in an expensive scarf with the scarf’s tails trailing in the wind as they drove. His eyes gazed into hers, admiring her happiness. He looked back and forth, first at the road and then at her outward happiness as he drove. It was a beautiful summer’s day in ‘63. “April Love” was playing and they continued to fulfill this cliché moment. The buffering of the wind disappeared and the scratchy radio was the only thing to be heard.

She admired his dark brown hair and gleaming white teeth against his tan skin. It was a perfect summer. He admired the childlike wonder she displayed during a simple drive down the coast, and her hair... that one blonde curl peeking through her chiffon scarf wrap.

He made a quick right turn into the beach parking lot and they hopped out of the mint coloured Studebaker.

And again, as if in a movie, they hugged each other and ran to their son, sun bathing on the beach.

They sat there together, enjoying each other and listening to the radio fittingly playing, “Old Cape Cod,” by Patti Page. The sun hit them and they bathed in the glows, talking and laughing, each enjoying a glass of Black and White scotch.

