

Between Us

Nearly midnight, I sit in my paint van with the windows down, invisible in the moon-shadow of elm at the edge of the parking lot. Sit with my beer, sip and watch the door of the restaurant for her to emerge. But first out comes the cook, the kid with the pickup with the primer gray door and fender that I could spray for him in ten minutes and make the truck match like new but I would never, since he's the boyfriend of the woman I love. And more importantly, she told me, confided in me over the bar a few weeks back, that he'd cheated on her and then told her about it. He stops in the parking lot. There's the flare of a match in his cupped hands, his angular face illuminated for a moment, as he lights a cigarette.

So I come out of the restaurant after work into the cool April. In the moonlight of the almost empty parking lot, I see his figure in silhouette, smoking, waiting for me. A scene I'll

write a song about. I smell spring and smoke, and he's placed himself between me and my car. He's figured the angles, which doesn't qualify him for MENSA, but I do love his head, the cheating prick.

I walk up knowing what he's going to try to say, again. His words like lyrics, that I put down in my journal until the music comes, poems I stash under the wicker laundry basket in my closet where he'd never look. His refrain that he was at least honest with me about the incident. Came right out with it, sat me down and met my eyes, knowing how I'd react, it couldn't have been easy. But it had been easy with *her*, hadn't it, I sliced back.

I stand tall, almost even with his height and looking at him, my chin slightly raised, slightly defiant, my eyes like crows' black and shiny and betraying no emotion. He throws down his cigarette but the smoke seems to hang between us – it's almost like he's in one of those glassed-in smoker's rooms in airports. He's hazily visible but the sound is on mute. Brief, not the least whiney I'll give him that, I see his lips moving – like how you can tell a politician's lying – but he's not a liar. His honesty is something I love in him. Yes, I said I'd give you that, you cheating prick.

I have words for her. In the near-empty parking lot of the restaurant where we work. This is some weeks after I cheated, but it is still between us like insulated glass, each of us on our separate side of it.

I wait for her, smoking in the cool spring night, thinking back three weeks to the breakfast the morning after, my dad and older sister both asking why I needed to tell her. When I said I just did, both shifted to support. My sister, who'd cheated and been cheated on both, never admitting or admitted to; and father, a thoughtful guy who nonetheless had been with numerous women while married to my mother, even an extended affair that had come to light only when he'd said her name in bed with my mother .

So I'd made my decision, and I drove the five hours home that day stopping only twice on I-95 somewhere in Virginia to vomit, feeling as god-awful as I can ever remember, all because I'd made up my mind and would tell her. So when she comes out of the restaurant, it is just as three weeks before when I'd come home. As steady-voiced as I can, I repeat my weeks' old refrain.

The college-boy cook stands in the parking lot smoking, waiting for her just as I am, and I can smell the smoke mix with the sweet, what, honeysuckle in the cool air, can smell it even from where I sit in the moonshade of the elm where everyone loves to park in the heat of summer because their cars stay cool all day. I'm sorry to see him because she comes out then, auburn hair straight and glistening in the bluish light, walks right up to him.

And they have words, though I can't hear them as my ears are pretty well blown after bouncing next to speakers as bar bands raged in my youth, then after years of the steady drone of the compressor that I hear even in sleep. When I sit at the bar and she confides in me – she's said

I'm like her brother, her best friend – I sometimes have to ask her to repeat what she's just said and that ruins the moment. Once she even whispered oh, never mind, I shouldn't be telling you this anyway, and I felt sick and felt moisture come to my eyes. So I slipped off to the restroom and composed myself, asked myself what did I expect because I'm not as young or tall or good looking as the cheating prick is.

Who has now thrown down his cigarette and they speak again, one brief emphatic line each, and I'm reaching for my door handle and begin to open it because I am here for her. Even if she might tell me then that it's between us, meaning the two of them. My hand is still on the door then when she slaps him. Hard. She's nearly as tall as he is – used to play volleyball, she's told me – and I see the open-handed hit like an overhead smash, a kill, and I'm only proud of her. I click my van door silently shut, smiling in the dark.

And the anger fills my right arm and I'm swinging my open palm hard as any of my volleyball kills back in high school, and I slap him. Then I pivot, a little dramatic, and walk proudly to my car. I didn't in any way crack. I half expect to hear his body drop to the pavement. He has to know that there's a long time ahead before he'll see me clearly, see me soften. I rev the little engine, jam it into gear, and speed off, as much as one can in a Corolla.

If I could have stepped away I might have realized that nothing could have been settled that night, that the only thing I wanted – to be back with her, to be back on her side of the glass – was months of hard work and many small steps away. These things take time. But when she slaps me I feel only burn, which my head links crazily to the smell of the cigarette I threw down but never stepped on.

A moment later, from my pickup's driver's seat I watch her taillights red and receding. I know where she is going, of course, know where she lives. (Know where she stashes emergency joints and mad money, condoms and her journal with poetry, lyrics she'll write music for and play at open-mikes in days and years to come.) But I know I can't go to her now.

I ball my left fist with the middle finger extended, in one quick pop like a boxer, I think, hit the windshield in front of me. There's a kind of dull click sound, and a crack appears before my eyes, widening diagonally just inches then a foot and then three feet across. Later, years later, I will think I should have known that night – or maybe some part of me did. But we'll have to fight and I'll have to apologize many more times before we'll break for good. And I mean that – for good – even if decades later she still might not agree, might still love and hate me from the other side of the glass.

I just thought he'd come back, that's all. Not that I wanted another chance to blast him, the little shit. Well, partly, but also because I wanted to see him again. Thought I'd get more chances – which I did, in fact – to make him sweat, make him beg, which he never did. I would have lost all respect if he had.

I expect he'll follow tonight, but he doesn't. He will, of course, in the next months, when I soften slowly to him, my hurt and anger worn down like driftwood, leaving the pale smooth grain of love that was always there but I didn't let him see again for a long time. And when he nearly has me again, when my distrust has scabbed and nearly healed over, he doesn't come back.

He'll look me evenly in my crow's dark eyes that can't help but show some emotion. Say he has to be honest, and it will be over. It isn't another woman, it is *him*, he'll say, which means it is me, too, of course. And I'll stare at him, not nodding or shaking not crying not seeing really, just watching his lips move like he's in one of those glassed-in smoking rooms at the airport, a stranger smoking and waiting for a different flight than mine.

From my van I watch as she spins away from him like a dancer, like she's was the one who's been slapped. And walks to her little red Corolla, damn near peels out. She's got her car window down and my van window is down and she glances my way as she passes me parked under the elm. I see her clearly in the moonlight but she doesn't see me, and I know somehow she never will.