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(Love)

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(Love)

Kate Menick

Our story is a train, skimming east to west across whole states of reiterated horizon. (An old steam freight, hobos lounging in an open car, can of beans for dinner and red bandana suitcases.) But somewhere in the middle we jumped. (Into the cornfields of the purple-gold Midwest, we rolled with arrested inertia and lay panting on our backs as the train sped to vanishing in the distance.)

It wasn't the first time we'd gotten off. Every college break—Thanksgiving, Christmas, Presidents' Week, Passover—the ritual was always the same. After dinner: *What're you up to? Yeah me neither. Come on down. See you soon.*

I wait, sitting on the bed that isn't mine anymore, with that tingling, low-stomach excitement of a five-year-old on Christmas morning, impatient to be allowed to wake the house. Then there he is, walking quickly, almost at the driveway; I run to meet him at the door. From the top of the stairs I can see him through the glass. He's standing there like he's not sure how it happened—like he's asking every time, as he had from the start: *What are you doing with me?* And the stairs I want to jump down—take two, three, four at a time—I walk.

This last time it was summer again—our first summer after graduation, first summer of the rest of the possibility of the rest of our lives. We drank cream soda and talked about jobs and acted natural. As if in the daylight we'd admit to what was happening. (Imagining that this is the dining car, or our shared compartment. Our luggage is safely stored in the overhead racks, and we're whirring and chugging down the tracks in a place where we belong. *To* a place we belong. Imagining we haven't abdicated after all, we're still sitting comfortably on the train.)

So the job's good?

And what's it like living with your boyfriend?

Boston, huh. Remember that time in Cambridge with the

bookstore?

Right. Memphis—you're kidding.

Must you always bring them up? We were doing just fine, but nooo...

Have you seen The Big Lebowski yet?

What about dumplings—steamed or fried?

We climbed out my bedroom window and onto the roof. (Open fields glimmered silver, reflecting the moonlight, and for the first time I found the Milky Way.) On our backs, looking at the stars and not each other, I thought how I always think at night: in an infinite and ever-expanding universe the possibilities for redundancy are endless. *Ten thousand light years away I see a pair of ex-lovers, lying on her parents' roof sixty miles from the nearest big city. They fold their arms beneath their heads, and don't notice and/or care when their wrists begin to go numb. Little by little they nudge closer to each other, keeping watch on the sky as nostalgia masquerades as memory. They'll climb down long before the sun rises, but not until after they've remembered something about what it means to be Home.*

Their life is a reflection of ours, as ours is a reflection of the past. Of high school and chess and Chinese food, and long walks without much walking and late nights without much talking; and graduation and what happens when it's over. (The problem with trains is that they *go* somewhere. You can't buy a ticket without a final destination. There are two silver lines, forever disappearing at the horizon, and our ungraceful, unpremeditated, unavoidable stops do nothing to alter their trajectory. We can pause for a night here and there, kid ourselves that the moments are real, but we never lose sight of the tracks.) Whatever we had, we still have. Despite all attempts to the contrary.

I look at him sometimes and it's like looking at a mirror I broke seven years ago and have been suffering bad luck ever since. I think I found him perfect and smooth and shining, and little by little added my scratches and tarnish. And when I couldn't stand to look at the damage anymore, I shattered him. *Thanks for everything we did and everything we were. But I'm sorry, it's*

over, you never get to see me cry again.

...You're still my best friend, you know.

I meant it. Until it wasn't true anymore. Then times and places and other things changed, and I grew up and down and up once more, and—because sometimes if light finds enough angles to refract off, it eventually finds its way back where it started—it became true again. (Our campfire—yes in Middle America with no log source for over three hundred miles—smolders and glows, and he digs into his bag and brings out a surprise packet of marshmallows.)

So instead of going to sleep because I had to wake up early and drive five hours back to Boston the next day, I'm there, on the roof, at two o'clock in the morning, with my parents fast asleep downstairs and two bewildered cats pacing in the hallway, wondering where we'd got to.

(There are things that can only be admitted at night, music that sounds different—inappropriate and discordant when the sun is shining. Deliberately stranded—between place, between time—we have no choice but to search for a soundtrack.) Me: *I still love you, you know.* Him: *I never stopped loving you.* Unsaid: He's in love with another woman, satisfied and still making it work; I'm dating someone I've almost begun to hate but have yet to admit it to myself.

Also unsaid: We want this, but only for tonight. In between our lives this is right—more than right, Right—but tomorrow, when the sun rises, and the day after that...we can't be here. We won't belong here anymore. (In the morning when we catch up with our train—it's always there, you see, waiting to be caught—this will be like the people we ride past. Their lives are fixed while we roll steadily onward, and we take for granted their immobility, and they take for granted our transience. And we never see them again.)

It is necessary to remind ourselves of that. And if we fail to do it out loud it's simply the suspicion that only the things which remain unsaid can ever be truly beautiful. (Or so we tell ourselves because otherwise we've got this punched ticket, and

no train conductor in the world who's going to accept it. Also, of course, the cliché is always simpler than admitting that we're nothing short of terrified.)

Shingle glitter embedded in the backs of my hands is all I have to hold me to reality. A sparkling shadow reminder of the obligations our choices have imposed, and the consequences if we choose, in turn, to abandon them. (There's the moment as the final whistle sounds: I think I may not get on the train. I could walk to California instead, I could stay on foot forever. And I'd lose so much—time, money, friends, and the clincher, convenience—but I'd find things, yes, I'd find things the train never stops for.)

We climbed down off the roof and said our sleepy goodnights at the door. We made jokes and promises and didn't hug and smiled—ruefully and conspiratorially—to think we'd do it all again next year. (Made the train with two minutes and change to spare.) Parenthetically, we wondered about the degree to which we've failed love.