Made of Steel

The world seemed like it had passed through a wet cloud—damp, but airy; dusty but cleansing. The sun was setting, though you couldn’t see it. Little bits of fog lingered in the grass like cottony snakes trying to burrow into the ground. Will sat on the edge of the Johannsen’s property. The Johannsen’s mansion-like house marked the edge between the two sides of town. He faced the lit-up automotive sign that stood on the corner like a glow-in-the-dark scepter. He eyed the cars in the yard—some with their wheels missing; others with their coats of paint peeled back like dough off a roller. Above him, the ceiling of clouds broke with a patch of whiteness and the dying light of the day. Will had tried to call Victoria on the payphone, but she had hung up on him the moment she heard him breathing and he didn’t have any more change. He had been going to say something this time—something about how he was really sorry, and how he was looking at that street light where they first kissed, and then again and again: the one where if you looked straight up, the bulb looked like the moon and she would joke about how they were kissing in the moonlight. But up until that point he had just wanted to hear her voice and he would put his fist in his mouth so she wouldn’t know anyone was on the other line. But he had been so excited that she had picked up the phone instead of her mother, he had let out a breath of excitement and she had known.

***

He had met her in the parking lot of the auto shop less than a year ago, when she was walking home from a party with this group from the rich part of town. She wasn’t wearing a jacket and it had been a cold night in February and he had offered her his jacket. At first she had jumped because, admittedly, he had come out of the dark and hadn’t really introduced himself. One of the guys stepped in front of her, ready to let out some sort of inebriated anger, but Will
just ducked around him and repeated himself: “You look cold. Want my jacket?” She had looked so mysteriously beautiful—half her face in shadow, the other half a golden-cream color. She had changed her expression from skepticism to smiling mischievously at him and walked out of the protection of the group and put her hand on Mr. Drunk’s shoulder.

“It’s alright, Wolf.” He backed away, growling in his throat like a reluctantly-obeying German shepherd. “Hi,” she had said expectantly.

Will had just taken off his jacket and put it around her. She’d pulled her arms through the sleeves and drew it around her small ribcage, almost getting lost in the denim fabric. Will nodded politely and began to walk away. She grabbed his arm, and he turned around to face her.

“Is that it?” she had asked. Will nodded, smiled and started backing away again.

“Wait!” she had called. She ran up to him, absentmindedly stroking her fingers up and down the zipper of his jacket. “Don’t you think I’m pretty?”

Will had been close enough to smell the rum and coke on her breath. She wasn’t drunk, but she’d had enough alcohol to make her pale cheeks flush; pink as watermelon. Will grinned and pulled her back under the lamplight by the collar of his own jacket and leaned down and kissed her. As he pulled away to breathe he heard her friends coming toward them. Reaching down for her auburn hair, he quickly kissed her again, and right when he saw them enter the ring of light around them, he broke it off and ran off down an alley. He didn’t stop to hear her friends’ reactions. He had recognized one of them: One of them’s daddy’s cars had been at the shop, and he had spit at Will’s father’s feet when his car wasn’t “damn shiny enough”, and Will didn’t want any part of them. But her, he’d seen her braid swinging on the way to school, and the blue color of her eyes mixed with the sunrise, and that was it.
Will now watched the darkness seep in around him—first in the shadows of the buildings, then in the dark brick of an old apartment building, then in the Johannsen’s lawn. He stared at the streetlamp, waiting for it to turn on, so the sidewalk where they had once stood would be flood in gold. He wondered when it would be dark enough again for the light to come on.

***

Two weeks after their first meeting, they had worn away the ice and the mud between the back porch of the auto shop and her back gate. To Will, it was a portal through which engine-greased fingernails and men in ironed shirts who looked down on him, fell away behind him. The click of that latch seemed to slide into his body like some sort of armor. She would be between the hollyhocks in the garden waiting for him like a predator. She would make her leap, and lodged on his back, would kiss the space between where his spine ended and his skull began. Will never made a noise: his hands gripped behind her knees and his eyes closed as he would breathe in the smell of the hollyhocks, primroses, the snow drops and her pollen-stained lips from when she smelled the flowers too closely.

Sometimes, in the wind-driven prairies a few miles away, they would play hide-and-seek. He would cover his face among the high stalks and count slowly to twenty-five. Every time he would turn around, he knew she would be gone—but still it always made him scared. He ached to find her, pushing through the golden forest of reeds in desperation as if her bright coral dress was a flag of safety he had to reach. When he would finally find her, he would grab onto the hem of her dress like a life-line, and laughing, she would pull them down to the warm, dry soil.

***
Will rocked slowly back and forth, vaguely hearing the Johannsen house winding down, turning off the lights, and just as if the house was slowly but surely closing each of its eyes, the yellow lights turned dark. The back of his throat began to itch, his body craved and somewhere inside his rib cage he was trapped like a very small person in a jail cell. Finally, he reached into his shirt pocket, pulling out the ashy white cigarette and a cool metal lighter. He just held them for a while, gripped them, wet them with his sweat. Crying, he lit the cigarette and for a long moment only breathed in, inhaling everything that was possible before he shuddered out a breath. He closed his eyes, trying to regain the warmth in the prairie, the heat from clutching the back of her head when his fingers meshed with her hair. But all the heat he could feel was the burning of his cigarette, and he didn’t let it go until it was too small, ungraspable, and slipped through his fingers.

He stood up and stared at the phone booth. He went inside and closed the door, and put his face against the glass. He grew restless and finally began searching the corners for dropped coins, feeling in between the ridges and under the phonebooks. He discovered fifty cents in the back of the phonebook in the white pages, letters Li-Lo. Breathing rigidly, he slipped them into the coin slot and pushed each number slowly: click-squeak...click-squeak. It rang almost eternally it seemed, until he heard her voice: “Who is this?”

He panicked and pull the phone away from his mouth. Then he inhaled a deep breath.

“Hi,” was all he could say.

“Will, please stop calling.” He heard voice break on “stop”, but didn’t say anything else.

“Will? Please, please don’t do this.”

“I’m sorry,” he coughed through his voice, like there were pebbles in his throat.
“Have you been smoking, Will?” she almost snapped. He bathed in the concern in her voice; the admonishing of her syllables. “Will, I thought you were quitting. You were doing so well, why would you—“ Her voice fell away. He could almost hear her thinking. “Oh.”

“I’m sorry,” he said again.

“Sorry for what, Will.”

He released all the air he had breathed in for the past two minutes—the past two months, really. “For everything. For calling every hour. For when I used to smoke in your garden. For…beating your friend up when he called you a “slumming slut” for dating me. For not letting you meet my dad. For disappearing for days at a time. For stealing flowers from the Johannsen’s so I could put them in your hair, and—“

She laughed softly. “I quite liked that part anyway—The Johannsen’s got some thorns up their you-know-what, haven’t they?”

Will’s smile seemed to break the plaster mask that had formed from his sadness.

“But ya, the other stuff wasn’t good, Will. My parents had only met you once at dinner before…I mean, you only said three words to them and climbed out the window before dessert! You weren’t like any boyfriend of mine they’d ever met before. And then you get suspended for two weeks. That’s not the way to win over my parents. You know I’m not allowed to see you anymore…And he’s still in the hospital, Will.” Will felt like he was on fire, and he leaned his warm face against the cold glass. “And you know Wolf, Will. Listen to me, Will. If you even show your face around our neighborhood, he’ll get revenge for Luke. He’s been saying some nasty things, they make me sick.”
Will thought momentarily of the nights he had walked around her neighborhood, hoping that magically she would come outside and forgive him for everything, and got a little worried that maybe they had seen him. But the feeling didn’t last long, when he heard her say:

“I miss you, though.” Will needed to explain.

“I dunno how it all started, Victoria. I swear I don’t. One minute they were calling me a bastard’s son, kickin’ at the cars, throwing my father’s tools on the ground—each one crashing on the concrete. The clanging won’t stop ringing in my ears. But I didn’t do nothing, I just went and started picking them up and all of a sudden they had damn-near picked me up and dragged me into a car’s trunk. They…they started saying things about you. Something flipped and I was kicking them, kicking them off at first, and then Luke was closest and I kicked his face and his fat hands. Anything I could reach, and I couldn’t stop. I couldn’t stop.” He was really crying now, his breath wet and fast, and he was coughing at all the crying and he pounded the walls of the booth.

Victoria was quiet while he cried. He heard her deep breaths with muffled sobs. Then he heard the dial tone.

Will half stumbled out of the phone booth and across the street. He unlocked the auto shop with a key in his shoes and sat on the hood of the red racecar he had just recently been shoved into. He began picking up tools and twisting the metal on the car with pliers, unscrewing the bolts from the tires and dragging the crow bar with its snake-tongue across the paint job with a rage he didn’t quite understand. He felt like he was falling apart. He remembered when his father first taught him how to jump-start a car and clean the engine. He was always saying: “There ain’t nothing that can’t be fixed that’s made of steel.” Will didn’t feel like steel anymore. He remembered the feeling of defense turning into offense, of the metallic smell of blood, red
iron spilling onto red metal. The carnal feeling was beyond anything he had imagined, overriding every gray screaming lobe in his brain. He hadn’t recognized his hands. He had felt more like a tanned-hide seat cover more than steel, that moment when he realized what he had done and ran away, slipping in oil and blood.

Will was brought back to the present when heard clicking outside. When he heard the auto shop door scrape open, he folded his body in half on that car, knowing what was going to happen. He could hear their breathing like a revving engine and willed himself to be a stone. He felt their shadows like one feels an eclipse—he knew if he opened his eyes he would only experience even more darkness.

“Look at him! He’s not even running.” One of them snarled. The familiar growl of his German Shepherd voice made Will smile a bit. It brought back that night, when Victoria had pushed Wolf aside like a well-trained dog so she could kiss Will.

“You know it’s your turn, don’t you? That’s why he’s smiling,” the other one mocked. “Your dumb dad will be cleaning your blood off these floors.”

Will wasn’t going to fight this time. He wouldn’t let himself be a monster. Like molten steel, his body received the blows. He felt his flesh contract and fill back out, each time more slowly than the last. He felt their knuckles against his spine, pummeling his arms, his thighs, anything exposed to them with his head between his knees.

Then he felt something cool, something soft between the top of his spine and the bottom of his skull. His body shivered with one last surprised clip to his shoulder.

“Get away from him!” he heard her voice, like a distant echo.

“Get outta here Vicky!” he heard her German Shepherd bark.

“I said, stop it!”
“You saw what he did to Luke, Vick! You saw him. We came to get revenge, and we aren’t stopping till he’s in the hospital.”


“He deserves it, Vicky. Get outta here if you don’t wanna watch.”

“He never deserved anything you ever did to him!” Will felt German Shepherd’s shadow cross closer to Victoria and his body tensed.

“You know, none of this would have happened if you hadn’t started dating this low-life. We all have reputations to uphold, and this scum belongs at the bottom of our shoes. Have you even seen his dad? Do you see this crummy shop? It smells like dogs live here.”

Will was standing up now, eyes open and aching arms ready to swing. The German Shepherd smirked at him.

“Aw, look who’s awake? You want some of this, boy?”

Will took a deep breath. He took Victoria by the shoulders and moved her behind the car. She looked at him with wild and trembling eyes, but he didn’t show any emotion. The German Shepherd held up his fists, his cronies moving up behind him. Will walked away from him. He went over an aluminum bin and pulled out a handsaw and started twirling it by the handle on his hand. He watched the reflected light bounce off their faces. He remembered when his father had first started teaching him how to twirl wrenches and hammers, something to help the tedious work day pass by. The German Shepherd started walking toward him but backed off as the saw started spinning a bit faster. He looked at his friends and they slowly started backing out.

When they got to the door, the German Shepherd turned around and just glared at him. “You aren’t done, fucker.” His friends menacingly knocked over a few tool boxes on the way out, but that was the last he saw of them inside his auto shop.
For a few moments, Will watched his spinning saw slowly wind down, rotating like a slow shining wind mill. Then it just hung on his fingers and he put it away. He turned around and looked at Victoria, whose face was damp with tears but she was smiling a little. He began to feel the aches again, and the wetness of the blood. He sat down on the hood of the car again and closed his eyes.

Victoria didn’t say anything but sat on the hood of the car next to him and rubbed his neck and let him curl into her lap, watched his blood stain her shirt. But the pain wasn’t too bad, and he began to breathe deep as he felt her warmth seep into him again and her light douse him like an unrelenting streetlamp in the dark.