

W. T. PATERSON

PASSING HEADLIGHTS

I KNOW THE LOOKS I GET when I talk with my hands. People only see the pale pink scars on my wrists, which doesn't tell the story of forgiveness or redemption. It only tells the story of a bartender who, when girls with college sweatshirts and fake IDs come in looking to score a wild night, gives it to them. And word can spread quickly about where to find a wild night.

"What does it take to earn a free drink?" the girl in front of me said one quiet Thursday night in November. Her blue eyes told me that she hadn't been broken by the world yet, but the world had certainly tried.

"How big of a tab are you planning?" I asked, letting the corner of my mouth curl into a smile.

"All of us are willing to pitch in," Becky said, and her friends giggled. I nodded and popped open five bottles of PBR. The red light of the bar smoothed the skin on their faces, making them look timeless, ethereal, and caught in a moment that should last forever but wouldn't.

"Hey Becky, do you mind helping me with something in the back?" I asked. She left her faux leather purse on the counter, and I led her through the closed-down kitchen, where the stainless steel oven and refrigerators shined under the static hum of the fluorescent lights. We pushed open the heavy green door to the back alley, where the Chicago fall was starting to feel like the Chicago winter. Bricks rose up around us in all directions, and fire escapes hung lifelessly above, all of them afterthoughts, as if they could bring safety into a world that hadn't considered it before.

Becky pushed me up against the wall and started undoing my belt. She kissed my neck, and in the next moment my pants were down and her mouth was around me. Midway through she popped up, spun around, and braced herself against the bricks.

"I want it," she said, panting against the night. Her frozen breath curled in the air like the words were spoken in cursive.

After we finished, she looked at me with her blue eyes still strong.

“What’s your deal?” she asked softly. She tried to act like she wasn’t looking at my scarred wrists.

“Broken,” I told her, buckling my belt.

“Amen,” she said. Then she asked for a cigarette, and I let her smoke in the kitchen as long as she blew the smoke up the exhaust fan.

Becky and her friends drank for free the rest of the night. They told me where to find them later if I *really* wanted to party, but the address was too far north for the busses, especially by the time I got out, and I wasn’t about to drive. I wrote down my actual name and number on a napkin and slid it to her.

“Burton, huh? You’ve got a last name for a first name.” She tucked the napkin into her purse and winked.

After the ladies had left and the air no longer smelled of perfume and hair scorched by a dryer, I yelled over the music that it was last call. The regulars squared up in cash, tipping way more than any of them could reasonably afford, but I didn’t stop them. Then they all stumbled into the night, moving like they were only one or two steps away from homelessness.

I soaked a rag in cleaning solution and ran it across the top of the bar while the industrial dishwasher kicked up a soapy tune. Then I walked through the chilly air towards Lincoln Avenue to catch the bus to Belmont. I got home, walked the three echo-filled flights of cement steps and cold iron handrails to my door, and clicked it open. The inside had red string lights hung along the walls over plastic pumpkins showing a scared black cat mewling against the moon. Halloween had been two weeks ago. The carpets were freshly vacuumed, and the couch blankets were neatly folded on top of the back cushions. I tossed my cell phone onto the couch and stretched. Lizzy, my girlfriend, was asleep in our bed. When I walked in to give her a kiss, I could taste that she was pleasantly toasted off red wine.

“How was it?” she asked sleepily.

“Same ol’ same ol’,” I whispered, masking my breath. She stretched beneath the comforter, and I could see the soft elegance of her naked shoulder. “I’m gonna go wind down in the living room.”

“No heist or espionage movies,” she said through a yawn.

“I’ll think about it,” I told her.

Lizzy had to get up at 4:00am and commute downtown to hop on calls with international clients, so she mouthed *okay* with her eyes already half-way to a dream.

“Don’t forget, you have Shelly’s thing in the morning.”

I nodded in acknowledgement and hunkered over to the couch, where I streamed a heist movie on mute.

A few years back, I went to pick up my niece Shelly in Oak Park and spend a day on Lake Michigan with her. She was five years old and could recognize me by sight as “Uncle Boo Boo!” Her mother, my sister Bonnie, kept Shelly’s sandy hair on the shorter side and curled behind the ears. She looked the same way Bonnie did when we were kids, which felt like a chance to start again.

The day before, I had found a giant conch shell in a thrift shop and dished out the buck and a half to give it to her. I put it in the back seat of my Jeep Liberty and shoved piles of fast food bags and journals of novel ideas into the trunk to make space for Shelly’s intermediate car seat.

When I rolled up to Bonnie’s one-floor suburban house, she was waiting outside on the front steps with Shelley, her eyes puffed with pink.

“You okay?” I asked. Even though it was early summer, I had to step over dead leaves scattered like coloured pencil shavings across their front lawn.

“It’s fine. Carter is just being . . . Carter,” she said, motioning inside with her head.

“Boo Boo!” Shelly cheered, tumble-running over. I picked her up and planted a giant kiss on her temple. She smelled like innocence and new clothes.

“Need me to go in there?” I asked, voice lower as if my darling niece couldn’t register tone.

“Jesus, no. He’s not Dad. It’s fine. It’ll blow over,” she said. “Give Mama a kiss!”

Shelly leaned out of my arms like being dropped wasn’t a possibility and gave her mother a peck on the cheek, which was her version of a kiss. Then she righted herself by yanking a scruff of my shaggy brown hair until her posture was balanced.

“She’s potty-trained now, right?” I joked. We buckled her into the car seat like she was about to be blasted into space.

“You know, it’s so weird. She was last week, but this week she’s gone back to using diapers. Hope you like wiping,” Bonnie joked back. “Pics, please, and be home by sunset.”

“You hear that, Shell-bell? We have all day!”

Shelly let out a hoot before going back to eyeing an empty McDonald’s bag I had missed. It wasn’t full of toys and fries like she thought it might be.

“She adores you. She’s always asking about cousins. Just sayin’.”

“Maybe if the right woman comes along,” I said, still believing my own bullshit.

I hopped in front, and we set off towards Lake Michigan. The roads were damp from the morning mist, and I kept the radio low because Shelly wanted to talk about everything she saw.

“That car has four doors. That car has no roof. That car has a puppy!”

The highway gave way to single lane routes like veins winding through renewed trees.

“See that thing next to you?” I asked, checking the rearview mirror. “The orange and pink thing? That’s a seashell.”

Shelly leaned over and picked it up, slipping one of the constraints from her shoulder. It was heavier than she must have been expecting because she had to readjust.

“What does it do?”

“If you hold it up to your ear, you can hear the ocean!”

She flexed her shoulders and hoisted it up to her ear. “I don’t hear anything,” she said, disappointed.

I looked in the rearview mirror to make sure that she was holding it right, which she was, and then the wheels of the car suddenly lost their grip and the back end whipped around. Everything that happened after that was a blur.

According to the police report, the car skidded out on a mild turn and hit the guardrail, which flipped it into the air. The insurance adjuster later said that this could only have happened if I was going 15mph or more above the speed limit.

What I remember was hitting the water upside down and feeling like my neck was being pulled apart like uncooked meat. I remember the cold and dark water rising, and my face being under before I thought to take a breath. I remember unlocking my seatbelt and going out through the shattered driver’s side window as it tore open my arms. I remember the panic when I thought about Shelly and went down after her. I remember my lungs burning. I remember pulling, yanking, and screaming muted fury into

the water as my arms bled inky black into the murk. I remember getting a handle on a small, limp body. I remember the back of the ambulance and screaming so loud they had to sedate me.

When I came to in the hospital, Bonnie was the only one who was there. Shelly was alive, but the cold water trauma had done irreversible damage to her ears.

“She’s going to need hearing aids,” my sister said, trying to stay strong but letting anger shape her words. She knew whose fault this was.

Apparently our mother came to the hospital too, but I never saw her.

“But she’s alive,” I said, hoping it would offer some relief, but it didn’t.

The police ran blood tests and toxicology to see if I was on anything at the time, which I wasn’t. They tested my eyes to see if I needed glasses, which I didn’t. Though a first responder at the hospital openly talked about how sand or moisture on the road can cause these accidents, it always fell back on my supposed inattentiveness and “reckless behaviour.”

A few months later, I found out over Facebook that Carter had left my sister.

After months of barely sleeping or eating, I took up sign language to make good on my word. Bonnie was the only other family member to follow through, though everyone had sworn up and down that they would. We had classes together but sat at opposite ends of the room like strangers.

It was there that I met Lizzy, who was auditing the class as part of a continuing education course in communication. It was the eighth week of the class, and I was called to the front to have a conversation with the teacher—an overly optimistic retired woman with perfectly silver hair. She was playing a doctor, and I was playing the patient. During the exercise, she signed *where does it hurt?* and I signed back *everywhere*. The teacher looked at me concerned. I immediately changed it to what she wanted and made the sign for *sorry, sore throat* and then *confused*. The teacher smiled, placed her hands over her heart and oversized beaded necklace, and moved on.

“You learn so fast!” Lizzy said as we were leaving.

“Oh, thanks. It’s uh . . . you know . . . mostly in the facial expressions. The rest is just learning vocab with hands or whatever.”

I’m Lizzy, she signed, spelling her name slowly, like someone with a stutter.

Burton, I signed back, speeding through the letters.

One more time? She asked.

B-U-R-T-O-N, I signed, moving slower but with purpose. I didn't realize it, but Bonnie was watching from the hallway. By this point, it had been over a year since the accident and I hadn't yet been invited to any get-togethers.

"I love that name," Lizzy said. "Are you hungry by any chance? Want to grab a bite?"

Empty, I signed, moving the gesture from my heart to my stomach as the corner of my mouth curled into a soft smile.

That was also the first year I got an invite to Christmas, and I brought Lizzy with me. Shelly was shy around me, as she should have been, but her eyes began to twinkle when I signed across the table.

Grandma is . . . big, round, I signed. Shelly laughed and hid her lips behind her hand.

Behave, Bonnie scolded, also suppressing a smile.

"What's going on? Why haven't we said grace yet?" my mother asked, posing the question to anyone but me.

Shelly looked up when her mother wasn't looking and signed *balloon*.

By the time Shelly was in grade four, Bonnie was on the road to forgiveness. I'd been to two more Christmas' and three Easters with Lizzy being the perfect buffer to my family. When she said she wanted to move in together, I hesitated, as there was still a lot she didn't know—a lot I hadn't told her—but I eventually said yes, regardless.

Shell-bell had to do an oral presentation about the history of Thanksgiving, and I was asked to attend as a surrogate parent.

"Listen, I can't be there because it's a madhouse at work and they won't give me the time off. Mom is being difficult. There's literally no one left, and it would break her heart not to have anyone show," Bonnie said over the phone.

"Bottom of the list is still on the list," I said, feeling the slight warmth of victory. "I'll be there."

At the school, I had to ring a doorbell and get buzzed in by the young red-headed receptionist. I signed a log with my name and number and got a big yellow VISITOR sticker to prove I wasn't out to kidnap a student or shoot the place up. The air was cold and smelled like construction paper.

The redhead led me down the chilly hall with shining floors to Mrs. Bower's classroom. It was next to a water fountain and construction paper drawings of what the kids wanted to be when they grew up. Shelly's said "Doctor," and the stick figure with a large head was patching up a "Boo Boo" on the arms of another stick figure with shaggy brown hair.

"Are you the father?" the receptionist asked.

"Uncle," I said, and caught myself looking her over. She blushed, which I wasn't expecting.

"Well, stop in before you leave. If you have time. If you want to," she said before turning and hurriedly walking back towards the office.

When I slid into the classroom the parents were all huddled against the back wall, snapping pictures and videos before anything had even started.

It took me two seconds to find Shelly. She was staring wide-eyed at Mrs. Bower's mouth, smiling when the teacher smiled, laughing when the teacher laughed, and nodding when the teacher nodded. She saw me and waved so hard I thought her arm might break. My heart warmed like the pieces were beginning to stitch back together.

Be brave, I signed.

You be brave, she signed back.

Kids stood up at the front of the room with paper hats looking like turkey feathers and read about how pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock. Some had their faces painted with small smudges of red, yellow, and orange.

When they were done, some other kids did a scene where the Native Americans accepted a bowl of chocolate turkeys wrapped in foil. After the last line they all dropped character to tear open the candy and shove it into their mouths. I was the only one who didn't laugh.

Shelly stood up by herself, sandy hair curled behind her ears, and held a piece of paper confidently in front of her. Natural light was spilling in through the windows, but the earth tones of the furniture and walls were dulling it.

"Pilgwims sailed he-aw on thwee ships," she said. She spoke the way it sounds if a person puts their hands over their ears and the speaker's tongue is swollen—no hard consonants, everything rounded and soft. "Nina, Pinta, Santa Mawia . . . but not Santa wike Santa Cwause. Santa means saint!"

I was so goddamn proud of her. I could feel hot tears well up behind my eyes, and when she stepped down and the other parents applauded I had to leave the room to recompose myself.

I blew my nose in the little boy's bathroom and took a moment before stepping back out into the hall.

Two boys from the presentation were at the water fountain goofing around. One had white-blond hair that looked ratty from the back, and the other had on clothes two sizes too large and one step past unwashed.

"Thwee ships," the ratty kid mocked. The other kid laughed and egged him on. "Santa Mawia!" He was putting his hands on his hips and rocking back and forth. The baggy kid was exaggerating his laugh almost to prove he was laughing.

The ratty kid mimed using sign language and tried to mimic Shelly's voice. "I'm a wetawd!" he said, going cross-eyed.

Whatever warmth was in my heart turned to ice.

"What'd you say?" I said, zeroing in on the little shit and pushing him against the wall. "You like picking on little girls?"

They both stood there, frozen in wide-eyed horror. They were maybe half my height.

"Sorry," the baggy kid whispered.

"But she doesn't talk right," the ratty kid said, almost in defence.

I hauled off and open-palm slapped the side of his head, making sure to catch his ear. "Hear that ringing? That's what her world is like." I slapped him two more times in quick succession. The baggy kid's legs were shaking so bad he began to wet his pants.

"I'm sorry," the ratty kid said, tears pouring from his eyes and snot dripping from his nose.

"You crying, you little bitch?" I said.

"N-no," he said. He looked down the empty hall for any sign of help.

"You gonna tell on me, little boy? It doesn't matter if they believe you or not because you'll know you cried, and you'll know you'll always be weak."

I feinted another smack and watched as he flinched and bumped the back of his head against the polished stone wall.

There was a small burst of applause and the unmistakable sound of shuffling inside the classroom. The two boys started slinking away, the ratty kid rubbing his ear and the baggy kid leaking out of the bottom of his jeans.

I peeled the yellow sticker from my sweater and flicked the crumpled remains at the boys.

"Shit won't get easier, believe me," I said and walked down the hall, leaving out of the same door through which I came in.

An hour later, my phone buzzed with a text from the receptionist: *You never said goodbye.*

I texted back the address of my bar and wrote: *Drinks on me.*

Bonnie called that night, and I'd only ever heard her that angry once before.

"Imagine my horror when the school called to say that Shelly is inconsolable because you left without saying goodbye and that you threatened a nine-year-old! You're lucky no one is pressing charges."

I stayed quiet to let her anger pass, but it didn't pass and she demanded an answer.

"That kid was making fun of Shelly. I told him to knock it off."

"By calling him a bitch? Are you out of your mind?!"

"I didn't know Shelly was that upset," I whispered into the receiver.

"I should revoke your Christmas privileges," she said. "Whatever you earned, you just lost . . ."

"Do me a favour," I said. "Don't tell Lizzy."

Bonnie sighed. "I'm not your keeper," she said and hung up.

I tossed my cell phone onto the couch and went to bed, and the next morning I found it in Lizzy's hands.

"Becky wants to know why you weren't at the bar last night," she said. She turned the phone's screen towards me, and I saw three pictures of a naked, perky chest. "Are you going to tell me the truth about this?"

A familiar, silent pain crept across my heart like shadow fingers along an abandoned highway.

"I'll think about it," I said.

Lizzy was fully moved out two weeks before Christmas. She took the string lights that once lined our apartment walls, and most of my winter days were spent alone in the dark watching TV.

Bonnie never pulled the plug on my invite to Christmas. I think she felt bad about Lizzy taking off, and I desperately needed to be around people who could at least fake being happy.

For Shelly, I brought a small box of band-aids—the colourful kind with smiling kitties and unicorns on it. I wrapped it with ads from a junkmail flyer and wrote "From Uncle Boo-Boo" on the front. Inside of the box, I stuffed \$200 in cash and wrote "For Med School" on a yellow post-it note.

Bonnie most likely wouldn't let her open it with the family there, so I prayed Shelly would find it when the sun had gone down and the house was quiet.

My mom was sitting in the dining room wearing a hideous sweater to put on a show for the new guy she was seeing. There was a desperation curling her laugh whenever he told a story about people none of us knew at a job none of us cared about. Neither of them came over to say hello when I showed up. My mom stayed in her seat, and the guy nervously eyed me through his thin-rimmed glasses.

By the time Shelly realized I was there, I was already sitting by myself in the den watching everyone interact from afar.

When did you get here? No one told me! she signed.

Your music was too loud, I signed back. Shelly feigned offence and tried to regain control of the smile that was curling half of her mouth.

Mean, she playfully pouted.

You can say "Asshole."

Shelly hid her mouth behind her hands and giggled, looking at her mom to see if I'd get in trouble for using a swear word. Then she motioned for me to wait, and I shrugged to imply that I had literally nothing else going on. A moment later she walked back into the room with a conch shell. At first I thought it was the same one that I had given her years ago, but then I realized that was impossible. She must have found another one.

She sat on the arm of my chair and held it to her ear.

I still can't hear anything, she signed.

Asshole, I signed, laughing out loud. Clearly proud, she danced with her shoulders and looked towards the family, who were talking in a language we both knew but couldn't tune ourselves into.

They don't want to talk to you? she signed. I shook my head no. She leaned into me, and I put my arm around her.

Empty, I signed, moving my hand over my heart.

It's okay, she signed. *I still love you.*

She leaned into my shoulder and grabbed a fistful of shaggy brown hair the same way she used to before the accident, and I pulled her into a hug and held on as my eyes welled up. In the other room, my mom tried to sit down but missed the chair. Everyone swarmed around to help pick her up, but Shelly didn't seem to notice or, if she did, decided not to show it.