

Tyler Corbett

The River Valley

You worked with her at the liquor factory the summer before she was dancing. Your 80-year-old father was confined to a bed on the second floor of the hospital, dieing of emphysema, and you'd tell him about her. She was your girlfriend, you told him, a lie, but he worried about you and liked hearing you had a serious girl. It was all temporary employment at the factory and you knew people who'd been there years without getting on permanent hire. You'd have Cokes with her at morning break and eat lunch across the table with her in the hall. Her boyfriend, JC, the half Indian, drove a forklift in packaging and receiving and took a different lunch hour.

Sometimes after work while she was waiting for JC's shift to end, she'd walk out to the parking lot with you and sit in the sun on the back of your father's old Cutlass. She'd talk about coming from California with JC and her kids, how expensive it was there compared to here, or about how they'd had car trouble in Oklahoma and been stranded for a while. She'd talk and grin, bright blonde hair, too bright, whitish even. JC was a racist. You heard that from the Mexicans. When you got switched over to the production line in the warehouse you saw him and how he was with the Mexicans that worked the line, all mostly older women. Even the men didn't take any abuse badly because they didn't speak English that well. You didn't work right on the line anyway but unloaded the trucks with

the two black boys, stacking pallets for the forklifts. Both were around your age and very quiet. It was better than the bottling line, except you didn't get to see her, being on the other side of the factory, and the liquor cases weren't bad to unload, but the cardboard dust got so bad in the heat in the trucks that once you worked halfway into the rigs the air was so heavy you could see it floating in the big swivel lights, and your throat'd itch and your snot'd be gray.

You'd see your dad in the evenings. His voice was going then, and after a surgery in July he hardly talked at all. If he was up to asking anything, it was about how the fish were jumping in the river, or about her, how we were getting along. One day it stormed so bad the trucks never made it in and the entire production line was cut after lunch. The parking lot was flooded to your ankles. You came to the hospital and in his room a nurse was bathing him in bed. She said he'd been in and out of sleep and asked if you'd like to finish. You took the cloth from the bowl and wiped his neck and face. *How are you both doing?* he made out, and you told him a story about taking her fishing that past weekend and what a natural she was even though she'd never been in her life. He liked that story quite a bit, nodding his head. By the month's end he'd be gone. You were lost then, rudderless. There was insurance money, so much you didn't know what to do with in the bank. There was the house, the dishes, plates, and the Cutlass.

She quit the factory when JC got fired in August. He'd stacked a load too high, five pallets tall, and gin and Kailua cases dumped from the ceiling over his forklift and the

production line. Three of the women had to be laid off from injuries, and the smell of the booze in the clean up made you dizzy and your skin stunk even after washing. The next time you saw her, she was dancing at Gene's Bar across the river. You'd started going there sometimes after work, that or driving around.

When you talked to her at the bar she told you JC was in jail for murdering his brother. She and JC and her kids lived across the alley from JC's mom and brother. *He popped the tires on the Pontiac*, she said. *And JC called him out in the backyard and shot him. Really, they would fight about anything.* Her hair was sandy blonde now and she looked very pretty. She dusted your fro and teased you about the cardboard dust on your jeans and arms, and in between her dances she'd sit at the bar with you. One Friday night in the parking lot a Laotian man cut her face with a knife. He locked himself in his car and cut his wrists and was unconscious when the police came. You weren't there, and you never saw her again. The next time you came in, Gene, the owner, was sitting at the bar. *Made me sick*, he said. *She could dance, that girl knew it. Fine as a thoroughbred, too. The girls all loved her. Just a damn shame about it.*

You'd never felt more empty. It was all you could do to stand and leave out the back door. The hot wind hit you and you walked down the hill in the dark to the riverbank. Under the interstate bridge, you climbed up the metal rungs and walked out on the rickety catwalk that hung over the rolling dark water. You sat and listened to the traffic overhead and watched the sweat drip from your forehead and disappear as it fell. The windows and

streetlights of downtown gleamed. The headlights in traffic, the neon signs. You wished the river would rise up and flood it all, down the avenues, over buildings. Submerge the place, the town, in black water. Like a paper map in black plunging water, and everything with it. You could leave, could drive up the river, maybe to the mountains upstate. Maybe to the big eleven-point lake. You had relatives there you hadn't seen since you were a child. You could find work and get a place, a trailer, anything for a while. You could drive up tomorrow, or now even. You stood in the high, warm breeze and made your way down and headed for the parking lot.