

CONOR KELLEY

In Amber Sun

What are you gonna do all day tomorrow while I'm at class?" my friend Dave asked me from across the booth at an Irish pub in Milwaukee called The Black Rose. He looked a little concerned.

"Oh, you know, just wander around. I love Milwaukee," I said.

He gave me a look. I smiled. "Dude, I'll be fine," I told him.

Dave and I split a pizza—thin crust, pepperoni. It was trivia night, so we got a sheet and played. I flirted with one of the bartenders and asked her if she had any beers from New Glarus, a local brewing company. We had a couple of their Spotted Cow beers. She walked to the other side of the bar. So I asked the other cute bartender if she had any Schafly beers. It was a little company out of St. Louis. If she knew good beer, she'd spring for that. She said she'd never heard of that company. I asked for the bill.

"Dude, hey, I'll get you back for that," Dave said as we walked out. I patted him on the shoulder and nodded.

Two cute brunette girls walked by, and we watched.

"Hey, you're going the wrong way," they said as we passed.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah," the taller one, a brunette, replied. "We're going to Water Street. You guys wanna come?"

I looked at Dave. He shook his head.

"Sorry, girls," I told them, and we walked away.

"It's just that I've got class in the morning, and I'm broke," Dave explained.

I scowled. It was too dark for him to see.

"We can go take dips and play video games," he said.

The ground was wet, and there were puddles everywhere; evidently it had rained during the day, before my flight from Seattle got in. It was not raining now, but the wind was biting hard for September.

That night we talked, took dips, spit in used beer bottles, and flipped around TV channels. Dave loved to talk and had no shame talking about the past, so we talked late into the night even though a part of me resented talking about times when I was happier.

The next morning, I woke up alone on the couch in Dave's apartment. He and his roommates were in class already. I showered and got dressed. The sun shone through the window on their dingy tan carpet. I walked down East Locust Street toward Oakland Avenue to find something to do. They had a little Subway sandwich shop, so I sat at the counter and did some people watching while I ate my breakfast. Lotta fat people out that day. Then I cruised around the musty-smelling Goodwill thrift store. Down the street was a tobacco shop that didn't sell any smokeless, and I tried on a shirt that I looked like shit in. Then I headed to the head shop.

My morning continued this way—I just wandered. A couple hours later I returned with a six-pack of Dale's Pale Ale, a used Killers CD, a DVD movie from the Redbox machine, and an *Esquire* magazine from Walgreen's.

Our plan was to drive into Dubuque, Iowa, that night to see some old college friends and celebrate our friend's twenty-first birthday. I was excited to see my friends, but I was more curious to see if Dubuque was anything like how I had romanticized it. These past few months I'd spent at my parents' house since graduation, Dubuque had started to seem better and better. If it really was that great, I might stay there. I knew it wasn't, but I still wanted to be sure. I wondered what Dave was going back for. Maybe he really just wanted to visit our friends. Dave was a sweet guy.

I spent the afternoon sitting on his second-floor creaky wooden deck, in a brown folding chair with that little sliver of padding on the ass, surrounded by crushed red keg cups and empty Leinenkugel's Summer Shandy beer bottles. The drink was half beer and half lemonade and tasted just like summer, but the bottles were beginning to smell old and sour.

The street was lined with tall, beautiful trees, not yet changing color, strong and healthy. I didn't know what kind of trees

these were. I wish I did.

With my feet up on the railing, the bright yellow shorts Dave lent me were riding up high on my thighs. Students walked by on their way to class, on their way home, wandering about. When girls walked by I flexed my ab muscles and lifted my chin in the air while I pretended to read my magazine. None of them looked up. That's kinda the way my summer had been.

I had the *Esquire* magazine in my hands flapping in the breeze, what was left of the six-pack in the shade underneath my chair, and the sun on my chest. It was almost warm enough to feel like summer. The sun warmed me through, but was not hot enough to make me sweat. This was the best feeling I'd had in months.

When I came back to Seattle, I was single for the first time in a while. My first week there, I met a girl named Alyssa through one of my friends. I danced with her, got her number, and took her out the next weekend for drinks. She was a sloppy kisser and her skin was soft. We were still sweating and grunting together on top of her bed when the sky started to turn gray and the sun began to stir. She was too into drugs for me, had a couple extra pounds on her here and there, but I would definitely see her again. She never texted me back or called me again. The next time I saw her out, I refused to acknowledge her presence, like she was a ghost I couldn't see. I may have taken her rejection a little hard.

In that magazine there was an interview with Clint Eastwood. He seemed like a pain in the ass. People respected him, though. And I knew, somewhere inside of me, I was still that guy, that tough guy people respected. It was just that lately, I had been crying a lot during romantic movies and sleeping late into the morning in my childhood bedroom. I was tired. Something had deflated me.

I didn't miss school. I think I missed being sure about something.

There was a girl waiting for me that night in my hotel room in Dubuque. That summer, we'd been texting all day and talking late into the night. She said she missed me and would head out West to start her life with me if she could. She had always wanted me when I was in Dubuque, but I was always taken. I broke up with my girlfriend a month before graduation, and we had each other a couple times. But this girl, she had a boyfriend now, and she loved him. So it goes.

I shook my head and pulled myself from my thoughts. Whenever I came back from a daydream, I wondered what it was that changed. Like how they say there's always a reason you wake up in the middle of the night, even if it was just a drip from the fau-

cet. I looked down at my torso. The shade had reached the deck, crawled across my legs, and climbed up my body. My stomach looked soft and pale. It was getting cold. That perfect moment I had in the sun was gone, disappeared while I was lost in the past, worried about the future.

In Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, one of the aliens from Tralfamadore remarks to the protagonist: "Well, here we are, Mr. Pilgrim, trapped in the amber of this moment. There is no why." When I read that, I understood him. But that September day I spent sitting in the sun, I hadn't read that book yet.

The leaves shuddered in the wind. Suddenly, I didn't want to go back to Dubuque that day. I wanted to go somewhere else, I just didn't know where or when. I missed something, I don't know what, but I missed it like hell.

I picked up my things and walked back inside to find one of Dave's roommates had returned from class.

"What's up, bud," I said. I didn't know his name.

I gestured toward the TV with the six-pack, two cans of which remained.

"t's this?" I asked.

"Transformers 2," he said.

I grunted and opened a can. "Beer?" I asked, jiggling the last can in the six-pack.

"You sure?"

"Yeah," I said and tossed it to him.

He cracked his open. I cracked mine. Cack. Cack.

I hoped Dubuque would be sunny. I hoped it would be a good time.