After You Left

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By: Anna Mullins

At the bar you’ll drink two too many Long Islands and take someone back to your room in the motel with a television still reliant upon antennas for cable. It’s just across the street from where you are. When the guy you picked up at the bar runs his hands up your thighs, and he has eyes that remind you of his eyes, don’t pay them any attention. Focus on the yellowing popcorn ceiling. In the morning leave before he wakes up, before you conceive of what you’ve done, before the street lamps turn off. Do not close your eyes, if you do his will be behind your closed lids.

Don’t go straight back to the house. Drive to Casey’s to top off your tank. When you go to pay inside don’t make small talk with the nineteen-year-old cashier sporting the post baby chub, it will only make you feel heavy, like you need a hot shower to start your day over. From Casey’s drive five miles below the speed limit. He won’t be on the road yet for work, he’ll have just gotten one of his drivers loaded and heading south to Perry, Iowa so he’ll miss the call from Ben Novak telling him that he wanted to discuss the steam flaker again. When you come to 117th Court Street turn west and take the gravel road. This will lengthen your drive time by ten more minutes. When he does finally get on the road you’ll be only a mile away from the house.

Don’t park in the driveway, but don’t pull into the smaller portion of the garage either. Park in what he’s designated as his spot, the larger side. Yes, his Chevy Silverado is bulkier than your Buick Enclave. His parking spot is closer to the door to the house. This will make it easier when you load your car with your belongings, even the basinet still in the packaging.

Move quickly. Breathe, focus on your breathing, that’s what the nurse told you to do three Thursdays ago. When

Under the bed linens—one of the first items you purchased together just two months ago—you’ll pull on yourself between your legs in an attempt to comfort yourself, just like when you were a child. The hum of the CPAP mask strapped around your face will make your stomach acid rise as you remember her arms flailing, legs kicking trying to sit up, fighting the nurse. Sleep stonewalls you. When you had laid down for bed with her three Thursdays ago her skin broke out in goose bumps like Braille, and her thighs, the bed linen, it had all ended in a blushing red.

Marcus will come early this Friday. He’ll load the steel gates, but you’ve just hired him and even with bags heavy under your eyes you’ll inspect the trailer before he leaves. In the quiet of the shop you’ll lean against the north wall, and scroll through emails on the iPhone 5 you bought to impress her, as if being president of Iowa Beef Systems wasn’t enough. At forty-eight you’re twenty-five years her senior. But goddamn that afternoon in May at Brick City, she was on her second deep orange margarita, red hair tossed over her shoulder, she was laughing at something the perpetually smiling bartender had said, and she looked at you longer than your wife ever had. That’s a safe memory: it’s before you confessed to being married, before the divorce from said marriage.

It’s like when you and she went to Kohler’s American Club for her birthday, one of a few untouchable memories. -You’ll smile and look up from your phone, before hearing it ring, the screen signaling its Ben Novak. Sighing deeply, you know it’s about the steam flaker. By noon you’ll be rounding the second S curve to Novak Farms, shafts of sun streaming into the window.

You’ll lean your head just five or ten degrees to the left and stare down the clock. It’s a game you’ve been playing since you met her. Concentrate hard enough, turn back
the nurse was strangling the anesthesia mask around your face you kept your eyes on his. When you closed your eyes, his were there. You wished that the warmth in his hand resting on your temple was spread evenly across your body. Calm down, we'll try again, he told you three nights ago. You'll only get your suitcase half stuffed with cashmere sweaters and jeans before you hear the garage door opening. Don't run down the stairs. You'll only miss the last three and fall, the kitchen's tile flooring is tough on the knees. Instead place your face in your hands and let your knees hit the carpeted floor of the bedroom.

When he finds you with your shoulders jumping sporadically let him touch you. When he pulls you next to him breathe. Do not pull away from him.

time. Turn back to Sunday morning and pressing your face against her freckle-splattered shoulder. Hell, turn back to any Sunday when you brought her Starbucks in bed, back when she lived in the townhouse. Turn back to the first sonogram, the whooshing sound of Kennedy's heartbeat. Turn back to Kohler, you'd said you'd always have Kohler. Turn back to Brick City, The Gateway, the sun streaming into the room that afternoon sticking to her shoulders, and back and she told you she wasn't the kind of girl to have afternoon rendezvous at local hotels with before you lowered your head to suck at her breasts. Ben will talk, wring his hands, you'll be a million miles away. You will already be pulling her to you.