

He Tells Me

by Travis Lovin

I can't hear the hiss of my cigarette over the city waking up around me, and the sky looks like she's not done with the rain yet, and I wait for the number four to take me downtown to meet Will. He called me yesterday, and when I answered, Will didn't say anything until he did, and it sounded like making sentences was difficult. Will asked me to meet for coffee, and I asked him how he was doing and if he was still writing. I said of course, and he said no, not in months.

I finish my cigarette and toss it at the puddle at my feet, and I don't hear the life of it extinguish, and the no. 4 pulls up. It looks like more rain is on the way, and the doors of the no. 4 open. The bottle in my backpack is half empty or half full, and it won't last me the day. I'll have to get another.

I'm greeted with an "afternoon" in that way all of us Midwesterners shorten already short greetings.

"Yeah."

It's a dollar to ride, and I slip my last one into the slot, and I see him back there again, the third time this week. I've never asked his name, and he's become the highlight of my morning routine. He wears a scarf today, and he's clenching a folded piece of paper, again, like last time. His face looks older than it is, maybe. Hard living, maybe. He's sitting six rows back, to the right, like last time. The clouds make it feel earlier than it is, makes the lights of the bus flicker bright and foreign. I choose a seat six rows back, to the left, like last time.

Last time he turned to me as the bus idled at a stop and said, “It’s all real; let’s make sense of it.” I just took a draw from the bottle, stared at him. Today he whispers it to himself and doesn’t look at me. I take a draw from the bottle. Today he talks to the window or something or someone that exists far beyond it, drops of rain carving paths down the bus window, distorting his view of the world outside or that something or someone, distorting everything.

He whispers, “I wrote her this, never gave it to her.”

He whispers, “I wrote you a poem. I wrote you a poem and buried it beneath the oak just beyond the fence line early while you slept, fog heavy, and cigarette smoked in that jacket you bought me on a Tuesday.” He says, “I wrote you this, never gave it to you.”

He turns to me like last time now, talking to me like last time, but he isn’t talking to me, you know? He tells me he hasn’t seen her in three years, and he tells me he failed her in that panicked voice we’ve all used when she’s gone and never coming back. He tells me he still sees her in a dream he has every night, but each morning more little details escape, and he wishes that they wouldn’t and that he could see her as she was before he said those things that made her stop saying I love you.

I know the feeling.

The bus squeaks to a stop, and I stand to exit, and I hand him the half-empty or half-full bottle from my backpack.

“Keep it. I’ll get another.”

Will hasn’t been to sleep yet. He orders coffee, black, and no food. I sit across from him, watch him run his hands over his shaved head. Jane left him a week ago, and most of him has stopped working. He’s started hanging with those people again, and soon he’ll be crashing on my couch, next to the furnace and the stack of canvases leaning against the wall. I carried Will to his parents’ bathroom one night in high school when he’d taken too much, ran cold water over his clothed body, hoped that he would wake up.

He did.

Will doesn't sit still often, and this morning he's clinging to a piece of paper and waving his knees under the table, maybe keeping himself awake, maybe fanning some imaginary flame that he's unaware had gone out long ago. I can tell he's starting in on a story. Will is a storyteller, and you can see the best parts of him when he's doing so.

"It's good, man. I've been reading and reading it again all morning. I found it in this guy's seat last night at that place on fifth after he got up and left. He spent hours talking to himself in the corner, rocking side to side, I couldn't look away. I asked him for the time, and he just stared at me, like I had just interrupted the most holy of rituals. Wild, man, wild! I picked it up, and it was wet, smelled like whiskey and urine and like he wrote it years ago and it just now saw the light of day or something."

Will reads, "There is a boy, and there is a girl. They haven't met yet, but when they do, they'll talk about that song they both love to hum in the quiet moments, and her face will soften in a way that makes him stare. There is a boy, and there is a girl, and they haven't met yet, but when they do, he will fall in love fast and so will she. It will be hard for them to be apart when he's driving through Kansas to visit his mother's grave and when she's visiting her folks up north. There is a boy, and there is a girl, and they haven't met yet, but when they do, he'll say you're beautiful and she'll say you're handsome when you sleep. They'll be happy until they're not, and the end . . ."