

A Trip in Town
Written by Alex White

Proverbs 27:6

Main Street is more capitalist than she remembered. The original mom-and-pop shops of her youth have been killed and converted into a mix of overpriced hotspots and repetitive chains. The old wooden storefronts hadn't been torn down but painted over in general shades of *blah*. She sucks the spit off her teeth and wonders if they know rot manages better when ignored. A damn shame. All of it. At least the road is the same. The sun-bleached tar and gravel shines through its pocks and scars, holding strong in a way that felt relatable. This made her bitter, a bit of sadness collects like bile in the back of her throat. At the approaching four-way stop, she concentrates on swallowing it. Daniel, in her passenger seat, continues to talk with the conviction of a Kennedy, clueless of the disgust hidden by her sunglasses. He has the window down, his right arm lounging across the car's barrier, and his knees continually catch on the glove box that hates to stay closed. Dani keeps pictures in there, thinking they're safer in between her registration papers than at home.

"They're gonna reach out this time, I know it," Daniel says, and in the summer sun, he reminds her of a Bruce Springsteen wanna-be. It is not helping her worsening mood.

"Don't get your hopes up, man." He pays Dani no mind, tapping his fingers on the exterior body of her car. The youngest tire rolls a half step slower than the others. She can feel it in the way the car turns, reminding her of someone two steps off in a line dance. The thought adds to the bile, and she swallows once more.

"No really, I can feel it! They finally see me as the responsible and successful man I am-"
"Successful?"

"Yes Dani! Successful! Come on, I have my own place."

"Which you share with a sad elderly couple."

"Beside the point." He says offhandedly, moving his fingers from the car to gesture toward a free spot on the side of the road. She gives a slight nod in understanding, heading towards their chance at parking.

"I have a job at a real solid place of business." Dani scoffs a little, not at him but at the thought of Doc's being considered a "solid place of business." The scoff maneuvers into her words, making them bubbly instead of sharp.

"As our secretary." It's satisfying to vocalize but doesn't land the way she wants it to, as the boy beside her seems too focused on his own thoughts to notice hers.

"I really played to their beliefs, ya know. Talked about the importance of a strong family and God -"

"You don't believe in God."

"Yes, I do, I just don't go to church." The voice of her mother rings like an old bell in her ears. *God doesn't care if you believe in him if you can't even bother to show up.* This swings between her tongue and teeth, but it's best if Daniel doesn't know that. He takes a second to roll up his window and wiggle a little, readjusting to the confinement.

"Right." is all she can muster, shifting her body to check the park job before turning off the car. They've stopped in front of a building two storms away from collapsing. Dani lowers her sunglasses a bit, recognizing the remains of her old bookstore, which, after the owner was accused of selling children communist propaganda, was quickly run out of town, and the store closed. Another damn shame.

"That used to be a really cool bookstore," she says, pointing towards the building, "And I gave a girl head in its public bathroom."

"Cool. I got a girl pregnant on prom night, but is this really the time to compare our sad cliches?" Something guttural escapes Dani like a cough or the need for air after being underwater too long and she laughs. Maybe it's not that funny, but it's certainly the funniest thing to ever exit this boy's mouth and she doubts he even knows it. Dani gets out of her car searching for fresh air and Daniel is quick to get out and meet her on the other side. She locks her car, still laughing, then catches eyes with the dying windows of the building.

"Touché. Now come on, the store's just around the corner."

~

The hardware store has a distinct scent of cut wood and canned paint. Sunlight breaks through the large front windows, exposing the floating dust that never seems to fall. He watches as Dani pulls her sunglasses off and tucks them into the front pocket of her button up. The two survey the store for a moment.

"How often do we have to get this stuff?" Daniel asks.

"Oh maybe once a month. We normally rotate who does the restock but I figure with you around that will stop."

"Only once a month?" She nods lightly and Daniel lets out a little *huh*. Her gaze shifts slowly to meet his.

"What?" Dani questions.

"I just thought it would be more frequent considering how much you didn't want to do it."

He watches as her eyebrows crease and her top lip pulls closer to her nose.

“You saw what happened to my car last time I was in the area, didn’t you?” Daniel can feel his eyes go wide, and his skin gets a little itchy. Any appropriate response is stuck in his throat, so instead he says nothing. He starts a couple of different words but can’t finish them, making it sound like *Tha-Ca um, sh-sar*. He’s a skipping record and Dani just pushes air out her nose in what he understands to be a laugh and a, *it’s okay*. The sun catches on the back of her hair as she moves with precision down an aisle, effectively ending the conversation. The light makes her look warm, which is somewhat jarring. He’s never seen her without hair that lands tight around her ears and at the back of her neck, but the color is a dead giveaway for what she used to be. It’s what you could call “all natural.” A healthy mix of brown and blonde even a few grays scattered about. It reminds him of the women who work school fundraisers, or their daughters that spend their time in youth group. He would never tell her, and she does a very good job covering it, but Dani reeks of her religion. Even with the baggy dark jeans, old work boots, and t-shirts that scream otherwise, Dani is the product of small-town Catholicism in a way she can never escape.

“Daniel, pay attention.”

“Right sorry, I was just thinking -” This is one of those rare moments Daniel has where he actually stops his words in time. He stumbles a bit but recovers as he changes his, *I was just thinking about how trapped you are and how I’m probably just as trapped but that makes me feel bad*, to a much more appropriate -

“Did you want Doc’s list back?” He reaches towards his back pocket where the “Don’t leave without” list has settled.

“I know what’s on it, but thanks.” He decides to take it out just in case as Dani squats to compare the prices of different latex gloves.

“Never buy these,” she says, hoisting one box in his face, but with the distance it settles more at his belly button, “They are complete shit, even the weakest of lubrication oil eats right through ‘em.” The box looks identical to the three other brands in front of them.

“Got it.” He says with little confidence. Dani puts that box back on the shelf while throwing a different one under her arm. Her knees kind of pop as she stands to head towards the next aisle. In passing, she stops in front of the rags and grabs a sack of blue ones that Daniel knows have a weird texture.

“Check to see if he needs a new oil pan.” She says. While moving past the rags and turning at the end of the row. Daniel scans the paper in his hand.

“Thought you said you didn’t need the list,” he says without looking up and runs right into Dani who has quickly turned around.

“I need to go right now.” She’s practically throwing the gloves and rags at him and somehow he catches them.

“What? Why?” Her eyes are chaotic but doesn’t bother to explain.

“Just check out and meet me -”

“Daniella?” He’s never seen a person lose their color so quickly. Dani looks dead while behind her, a woman in her mid-20s looks fully alive. Her bouncy brown hair and pink lips are somewhat animated, and holding her hand is a girl no older than two who looks painfully identical. Dani’s body straightens so slowly no one would notice the change if they didn’t also see her face shift from fear to absolute focus. She turns to meet the woman.

“I knew that must have been you.” The woman spoke with her teeth. Daniel didn’t know people could do that and still look as lovely as she did.

“In the flesh.” Each word is clipped at the end like it’s painful to say.

“I didn’t know you still lived around here Daniella.”

“Where else could I go, Bernice?” Dani places poison in the name, strong enough even Daniel feels the impact. The woman, or Bernice, merely hums a deep and disappointed sigh. He imagines this response has been practiced on her daughter after she’s made a mess, but she can’t really be mad at her because she’s only two. All of this too says it’s super condescending. Dani doesn’t bother to say anything else, but her left hand is clenched in a fist so tight the veins start to bulge. Bernice doesn’t notice or she does and doesn’t care. Daniel can’t really get a read on this stranger. She clearly knows Dani and if the full name treatment says anything, Dani knows her too. His confusion must have started to surface, as Bernice looks him up and down.

She smiles, keeping her eyes on him as she says to Dani, “Aren’t you going to introduce me to this fine young man here? Is he your boyfriend?”

“We both know he’s not.” Dani replies.

“A sister can hope now can’t she?”

“Thought you said I was no sister of yours?” Another hum escapes Bernice, this time sounding like an old radiator. Her toddler starts to get antsy but seems to know better than to make a fuss. Dani refuses to look anywhere but straight at her sister and Daniel is now just registering everything.

“Wait! Sister?” He chokes out.

“Not now Daniel,” Dani bites, keeping her stance strong while Bernice cocks her hip a little as if settling into a long chat with an old friend.

“Daniel? Now isn’t that a treat? Hope that’s the only trait you share with my baby sis here. Her condition would be a real shame on a man like you.”

“Oh fuck off Bernice” Dani spits, at the same time Daniel finds himself saying,

“I would be damn lucky to be anything like her.” Dani breaks her stare now and looks at him. He can’t tell if it’s anger or fear or what but the look she gives him is murderous.

“Mom?” The little toddler squeaks and Bernice lightly squeezes the child’s hand.

“Give me one moment Martha.”

“Martha? Of course.” She cracks and a little stumble enters her breath pattern. Daniel notices it and so does Bernice. Her older sister smiles just enough for Daniel to realize she has won. He didn’t even know the two were competing.

“Well one of us had to honor mom,” Bernice takes her free hand to pull a bit of hair out of her daughter’s face and tuck it behind her ear, “Speaking of, she’s up front talking to Mr. Bailey. I would call her over but well Daniella, we both know that would just about kill her.”

“Wouldn’t want that would we,” She pauses only for a breath, “We were leaving anyways.” Dani takes one quick look at her sister, then lets her eyes rest on her niece before rushing down the aisle.

“I’ll pray for you!” her sister says after her and all Dani does is raise her middle finger and leave the store. Daniel’s shock finally wears off and he starts chasing after her. The toddler says something, but he only catches Bernice’s response, “No one you need to worry about” before the store’s door shuts behind him.

~

She’s running. Her lungs burn. Her eyes burn. Her head has extinguished any thought other than *go*. In the distance, she can briefly hear someone calling her name but no way in hell is she turning around. Can’t. Won’t. Her heart knows she’s lying. Didn’t she tell herself the same thing all those years ago? *Never look back, never return.* What a load of shit. She catches a glance at herself in the glass windows of a store her mom used to buy fabric in. It’s not her in the

reflection. Not really. The store remembers a younger version of Dani, one in her Sunday best with missing front teeth and her hair in the braid crown Bernice taught her how to do. These shops remember Daniella but don't realize she's gone. Her lungs burn. Her eyes are wet and her heart hurts. So she runs until she makes it back to the corpse of the bookstore and collapses by the front passenger wheel of her car.

Daniel's heavy steps echo down the road as he gets closer, but they are quickly overpowered by his heavy breathing. He's panting and Dani struggles to look at him. She will not cry in front of a teenage boy, but the bile returns and builds like a fire in the back of her throat. He's still catching his breath but lets out an exhausted,

“Dani” *inhale*, “are you okay?” *exhale*.

“Never been better.” Her words come out with a wet sob. Daniel shifts to sit next to her and drops everything she gave him to hold as he does.

“Did you pay for any of that?” she asks, still choked and wet. Daniel's back straightens as his eyes shoot down the road.

“Oh shit! No! I just left! You ran and I didn't want to leave you or stay with, shit, whatever her name is. Crap. I'm never gonna be able to go back, am I?” The mix of thievery, running four blocks, and whatever else is going on in his head has caused Daniel to develop these red patches covering his cheeks and forehead. He looks like a Cabbage Patch Doll. He looks like a child. She looks to the sky.

“It's okay, you can pay him for it next time.” The pair sit in silence then, allowing the whistling trees and natural buzz communicate for them. Dani needs the silence more than she needs him to say anything, but she can't let it go.

“She has a kid.” Dani says, more to the trees and the road and the bookstore left to die than to the boy beside her. The statement settles between them for a moment before he merely repeats.

“She has a kid.”