**Between Sky and Eroding Peaks**

Patrick Malka

 The Rockies were behind me. I was glad to see them recede to precious few pixels in my rear-view mirror. Something about their unashamed dominance over the landscape made me uneasy. Mountains on all sides, always closing in. Mountains that big are the youthful ancient, the boots on the ground. They’ve seen it all. It was silly that my claustrophobia required that kind of otherworldly grandeur, but it always did.

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 I had been driving for a bit over two and a half hours, almost 300 km. When I finally stopped to stretch my legs along the side of the road, I opened my door, and a bee exited the car with me. I must have trapped it hundreds of kilometers back. It hit me that this bee was never supposed to travel that kind of distance and will likely never find its way home.

 I did that.

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 Driving through the prairies, the sky a uniform grey, I thought I could see rain in the distance, a funnel shaped sheet uniting sky and ground like tightening scar tissue. It only took a few more minutes to realize what I was seeing was in fact the opposite. Smoke rising to meet clouds. Smoke from an upside-down compact car that had caught on fire by the side of the road. The young woman sitting far too close to the wreckage only looked up when I came to a complete stop, my flickering hazards illuminating the side of her face. I exited the car quickly, but not too quickly. I did not want to seem as dangerous as the nearby flames. I asked, “Are you alone? Is there anyone else?”

 She looked back at the burning car for a long beat, looked down the road, past me, then looked me in the eye for the first time and said, “I am.”

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 We watched her car burn for a while. When I offered to drive her to the nearest city, she didn’t say anything for an uncomfortably long time. I kept my distance. Without prompting, without context, without really knowing why, I started spouting facts about myself.

 *I’m a geology student.*

 *I study shale formations in collaboration with the paleontology department at U of A.*

 *I played hockey until I was sixteen but injured my right knee so badly, I haven’t played any sports since.*

 *I tell people my favorite movie is The Thing, but really it’s His Girl Friday.*

 *I cried the first time I saw a giant Douglas Fir.*

 *I cried the first time I saw the Pacific Ocean but for a different reason.*

 *I think you should let me help you.*

 She looked up at me, expressionless, but held out her hand for me to help her up.

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 She sat in the front passenger seat in a hoodie I retrieved from the trunk. She was initially in shorts and a T-shirt. I was embarrassed to hand it to her knowing I had worn it the last two days of travel. She didn’t hesitate to put it on. She slouched in her seat, her knees propped up against the dash, her head against the window. She pulled a receipt from the hoodie’s front pocket and tucked it into the space between the seats. Her movements and posture suggested a easy familiarity.

 “There’s a bee struggling in the door’s cupholder here. Friend of yours?” she asked.

 “More like a hostage.”

 I immediately regretted the joke.

 “I mean, it’s either the same one that flew out of the car earlier and came back, or I keep picking up bees every time I stop.”

 “That seems unlikely,” she said.

 “I know,” I said.

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 Hours went by without us seeing a single thing beyond field and cloudy sky. We did see an abandoned train. a dozen or so cars long, the rusty colour of a forest stream. It was a stunning incongruity with the landscape. I wasn’t aware we were anywhere near a railway corridor.

 The silence was comfortable. I assumed she was asleep, coming down from the adrenaline of her accident. It had been a long time since I had anyone in the passenger seat resting while I carried out the task of getting us from point A to point B. I could feel a pressure dislodge in my chest, radiating a warmth which rushed up my throat in waves, eroding away at something I thought had calcified.

 I looked over at her and noticed an injury on her knee and calf I hadn’t noticed before. A scrape which had taken the first layer of her skin and left a mandala of streaked and beaded blood. I didn’t want to disturb her, it could wait.

 The bee caught my attention to my left. It vibrated aggressively at the window’s seam. It wanted out. I rolled the window down and watched the wind take it like a slap. I realized I had not looked at the open road ahead of me in almost a minute. The scenery so consistent, I couldn’t be sure we were moving at all. I looked back at her. Her eyes were open. She stared at me in silence. Another layer of skin was gone from her leg, now exposing striated muscle fibers veined with strips of fat and hints of obsidian black bone. Her hair and teeth had fallen out, tumbling slowly across the front of the hoodie. Whatever was happening to her, it was happening fast, I needed to pull over.

 “Don’t pull over,” she said, knowing my thoughts.

 “We need help.”

 “You know we don’t need help. We just need to try again. Remember, you did this. Now keep your eyes on the road.”

 So, I did.

 I looked in my rear-view mirror.

 The Rockies in full view, receding fast.

 I looked at the passenger seat.

 It was empty.