

How I Spent My Summer Vacation... When I Wasn't Drinking

by Anthony M. Powers

The traffic light ahead of me flicks over to red. I step down hard onto the brake pedal and stop about a foot past the faded white line painted across the pavement. The speed limit on this stretch of Center Ridge Road is 25 miles per hour, but in my five years experience as a Cleveland driver, I've never seen anyone go less than 30 through this particular portion of suburbia. This of course goes with the exception of the thirty-something housewife talking on her cell, eating, and digging through her purse all at the same time, or the cotton-candy haired geriatric who can barely see over her steering wheel.

Living in this place has turned me into a cynical old bastard by the age of 21.

Over my own blaring music, I hear a dull thumping sound emanating from the Cadillac stopped to the left of me. I turn my music down and look over. In the driver's seat is a fat, grisly-looking Hispanic man with a dark blue bandana tied around his forehead so low that you can barely see his eyes. His car is pulled even farther forward than mine. Next to him is a girl of similar ethnicity, although to be completely honest, I can't tell what she is at such a short glance. Her hair is crimped and she's wearing over-sized, white-framed sunglasses. She notices me gawking at her and her boyfriend and she gives me the finger. I look forward again and turn my music back up, this time even louder than before. Morrissey is singing about how his big mouth has gotten him into trouble again and that he doesn't deserve to be considered a part of the human race. Generally speaking, I know how he feels.

I take a cigarette from the pack of Camel Lights sitting in the passenger's seat and light it with the Zippo that Jack had lent me the day before. He had cracked open my Bic the night before last while attempting to open a bottle of Guinness with it. I inhale and look to my right at the gigantic shopping center that was built sometime within the past few years; I have no idea when, exactly, because I've been going to college three hours away for the past three years. The little details about your home town tend to slip by you once you stop living there full-time. I crack my window open and exhale.

Before the shopping center was built, there was a shitty mall in its place. This mall, Westgate, was pretty cruddy for this part of town; the whole place had a grimy feel to it and it looked like it was stuck in the year 1982. The mall also had a sort of seedy element to it—big empty parking lots, park adjacent, very few security guards.

You get the idea.

At that time, the neighborhood was made up of mostly white, upper-class families who sent their kids to private schools, went to church every Sunday, and paid their bills on time. My friends in the car next to mine were a testament to what some would refer to as the “social decline” taking place all around the city. I think this kind of thing is what people usually call “class warfare” or something like that. In my opinion, fuck them all. If everyone stopped thinking they were better than everybody else, the world would be a whole lot calmer. But coming from a middle class family myself, my opinion is about as important as a single piece of confetti at Times Square on New Year's Eve.

I can't remember the last time I had been to the mall before they closed it down. I'd spent a decent portion of my childhood and early teenage life there though. My sister, my cousins, and I used to trick-or-treat there on Halloween; my grandma said it was a safe alternative to “running around the neighborhood like a bunch of hooligans while wackos were lurking around every corner.” This didn't change the fact that we'd usually go out trick-or-treating through the streets of Cleveland afterwards anyways. Grandma also used to take us Christmas shopping there so we could buy presents

for all of our parents. It never really helped Liz or I though, considering mom was always there with us, too. At the time, she was the only adult in the family who was strictly a stay-at-home parent, and therefore her and my grandma were always the ones to take care of the five kids.

Then around 6th grade or so, my friends and I started going to the mall to just hang out and wander around. There wasn't much else for kids our age to do if we didn't play sports or get invited to the "parties" the "popular" kids used to have. I hesitate to say we were unpopular, even though we were. It's just important to remember that we wanted it that way. Anyways, we used to get chased by rent-a-cops through the parking lot or sit in almost completely empty showings of three month old films at the crappy movie theater that was connected to the mall. This went on until about freshman year of high school. We didn't know why we did it, but it was something to do. It was better than nothing and a hell of a lot better than sitting at home with our parents on a Friday night.

There's more that I remember, but I suppose it really doesn't matter. It's all gone now. A main staple of my youth, to a pile of rubble, to this. A shopping plaza absolutely identical to any other you may find across the country. Consumerism at its finest.

I look back at the light and it's still red.

"For fuck's sake," I mutter. I take another long drag of the cigarette. I see the light on the other side of the intersection turn yellow and I get ready to drive.

Then, I hear tires screech and see two cars attempting to make the light before it turns red on their side. The first car, a tan Sedan, makes it before the light turns. The driver, a trashy-looking, overweight woman with a half-eaten ice cream cone in her hand, is leaning forward towards the steering wheel. It looks like she's reaching down onto the floor for something, but I can't see what. In my head, I hope she's reaching for a napkin she may have dropped, but from the look of her, it's more likely she's reaching for sprinkles or hot fudge for her cone. In any case, she drives too fast out of the parking lot and the very front of her car hits the street as she pulls

from the driveway. I see her face slam into her steering wheel. Her horn beeps. She drives off, seemingly unfazed.

My mind quickly leaves the ice-cream woman, however, when the car behind hers flies through the now red light. I don't know what kind of car it is, but it's only slightly bigger than my Toyota and maroon in color. The driver is a tough looking guy in his mid-twenties wearing sunglasses and a baseball hat. More importantly, my eye catches a skinny blonde in his passenger's seat. She's wearing Blues Brothers-type sunglasses and even from where I'm sitting I can tell she's dressed in an old, worn sundress she probably bought at Goodwill. I immediately think it's Keighley.

I quickly try to shake this though off, though, because I know that that would be impossible. Keighley lives in Colorado and I'm in Ohio. Keighley's hair is brown—but wait, I heard she had dyed it blonde since I'd last seen her. There's no possible way..

The driver of the car behind me lays on his horn and I break out of my trance. The light's now green and my Hispanic friends are long gone. I step on the gas.

I know it wasn't really Keighley, but it still bothered me. The memories come flooding back, bringing all the intimate details I've tried to drown with beer and hard liquor.

“Shake it off, kid,” I say out loud.

I really need to stop talking to myself.

I take a left. Then a right. Then another left into the Starbucks parking lot.

This is what my summer has come to: me, out of a job, aimlessly driving around the city looking for places to write, places to read, places to occupy my time. I need to do something, to do anything other than sitting in my parent's living room watching T.V. all day until I head over to Jack's house to drink myself into a stupor every night.

Today I decide that I'm going to go to a coffee shop, one I haven't been to before. Foolishly, I think that going to a chain shop won't be so bad. My gut tells me I'm wrong.

I park my car in the parking lot behind the shop and flick my cigarette butt into a sewer grate. There are two guys standing in the parking lot and they glare at me as I walk towards them.

“Hey, use an ashtray, asshole,” one of them says.

“Fuck off.”

I walk past them and notice that they're both holding small, black journals and notebooks. They've both also got messenger bags, which are probably holding their laptops.

I've got the exact same things with me.

I realize that they're both writers, too.

Great.

I walk into the shop and the girl at the counter is cute.

Scratch that—she's gorgeous.

Her medium-length black hair is tied back in a ponytail. She's pale and rather gaunt, but not in the way that crack-addicts are—she's more elegant, more pure in some way. She's reaching up for something from a shelf on the other side of the counter, her back to me. The back of her shirt lifts up and exposes some of her skin, just enough to give a glimpse of a tattoo on her side. It's impossible not to notice her curves. She turns, but hasn't noticed me yet. She's wearing black, thick-rimmed glasses that try to hide her dark, doll-like eyes. Her eyes dart up at me for a second, but look away again just as quickly.

For some reason, the next thing that pops into my head is this: I picture her naked, writhing on top of me and moaning in ecstasy. And then I feel guilty for it. I mean, who am I to forcibly insert this poor girl into a fairly inappropriate situation in which any feasible lines of intimacy were crossed within mere seconds by a complete stranger? Even if it was just all in my head. The sensitive part of me says I'm a pig; the other part says I just need to get laid. The mental images keep popping up. So “oink oink,” I guess. I'd ask cashier girl for her number right on the spot, but my current “dry spell” has made me feel like I've lost my touch with women.

“Hi there,” she says. Her voice is soft and kind.

I try to force out the perverted voices going off in my head like ambulance sirens.

“What can I get you?” she asks.

“Um...” I look up at the drink menu and half of it isn't even in English. I knew this was a bad decision. “Can I just get a large coffee?” I ask. She chuckles softly, but just once.

“Sure,” she says. She smiles at me the way employees are supposed to smile at customers. She hands me my drink and I pay, but don't tip because I'm almost certain I'll eventually need more coffee and refuse to tip twice, even though cashier girl is cute. It's not like she's a waitress, working for less than minimum wage. Her tip jar is just a bonus. I walk to the back of the shop and try to find a quiet place to work. I hear the two writers from the parking lot walk in behind me and they greet the cashier girl by name. I glance back and she has a big fucking grin on her face.

They must be good tippers.

A few minutes later as I'm setting up my computer, three more guys walk in and join the other two as the girl's getting their low-fat lattes with soy milk. All five of them are wearing polo shirts and assorted khaki pants and shorts.

Great.

It's just my luck I come here at the same time as a writer's circle made up of thirty-year-old yuppies attempting to be artsy. I'll never understand what people like them have to write about. For a second I feel anger, but I quickly realize my judgment of these men is superficial and unwarranted. I hate myself a little for it. Maybe I really do just need to get laid.

I manage to pump out four of five pages over the next couple of hours, which I know in the back of my head I'll probably just end up throwing out later. I listen to music all the while, but in-between songs I hear some of what the writers are saying. Eventually, I push the pause button in the middle of a song by Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds because I see from the corner of my eye that one of them is reading from his story to the whole group. I listen intently out of sheer curiosity, which, as you well know, killed the cat.

Whose cat? I have no idea.

All I know is that said cat is no longer with us.

"...smiled as she walked past me," the man recited slowly, not looking up from his notebook. He's fumbling through his sentences like a dyslexic third grader. It was the guy who called me an asshole in the parking lot, so I don't feel bad about being such a son of a bitch to him in my head. "I walked to the other end of the bar and bought her a drink and by the end of the night I knew that she would be the woman I was going to marry..."

I turn my music back on. I pick up my coffee cup only to realize that I've run out.

I go back up to the front of the shop and the same cashier girl is still behind the counter.

"Need something else?" she asks.

"Yeah, can I get another coffee?"

"Refill's gonna be fifty cents."

Shit.

I only have a credit card. She gets my coffee and turns back to me. I hand her the card and she looks up at me over her glasses. She tosses my card onto the counter in my direction and fishes two quarters out of her tip jar.

Now I feel like a complete dick.

"Thanks," I say, but she doesn't respond.

I pick up my card and my drink and go back to my spot.

The writer's group leaves a little while later and for a short time I'm the only customer in the shop. Within a few minutes though, women in pants-suits enter the shop one after another, each of them with a cell phone in her hand. Not one of them even bothers to take their sunglasses off as they talk to cashier girl. I can tell by the look on her face that this is her least favorite part of the day. I check my watch and see that it's about 4 o'clock—the beginning of rush hour. The women leave as quickly as they enter. None of them tip.

Within an hour, there are more people coming into the shop and actually staying. I start to feel suffocated, so I pack up my computer and my notebooks. As I do, I glance up for a moment towards the

front of the store and cashier girl is looking at me. We make eye contact and she quickly looks away. She's taken her glasses off and she's even prettier than she was before. The sun is shining in through the glass windows in the front of the store and as cashier girl looks down into the register, pretending to fumble with loose change, the light catches her in a way that almost makes my heart stop. Some of her hair has fallen out of her ponytail and into her face. She brushes it back from her forehead over her ear.

I think I'm in love with this girl.

I finish packing up my things and start to walk back to the front of the shop. Cashier girl isn't waiting on anyone and she's still looking down as I walk by. I put my hand on the door and look back once more before I leave. She's looking at me again, but this time when I look back her eyes don't hide. I panic and have no idea what to say.

"See you tomorrow?" I ask after a few seconds that feel like an eternity. Did I really just say that? Smooth, man. Real smooth.

She hesitates.

"Um... yeah. Yeah, I guess I will," she says, blankly.

I smile at her, but before I can say anything else, another woman in business attire pushes past me into the shop. She's dragging a young girl—who probably weighs more than I do—by the arm behind her.

"...I don't want to hear your excuses!" the woman shouts at the girl. "That's no excuse to quit, I don't care what the other girls say!" The little girl stays quiet, but looks like she's on the verge of tears. I can only guess what they're talking about as the woman immediately starts barking her order to cashier girl. I'm still standing in the doorway as the girl looks back at me. A tear rolls down her chubby, red cheek. I look to cashier girl one last time, but her back is now to me as she gets the woman's order.

I put a cigarette between my lips and walk out the door. I leave knowing full well that I probably won't have the guts to come back tomorrow.

