

Clowns, Panthers, White Clouds

by Michael Seidel

My car stopped working on a one-way street. This was Chicago, way past the dead of winter, when the body of cold had already begun to decompose around us and made our heads fertile with well-fed worms of hysteria. Rudy was with me, wearing her cape. She kept waving her phone, saying, *Who should I call, huh?* as I turned the key to expel more hallowed out sounds.

I ran down a list of the few car-related words I knew: Battery? Gas tank? It was an admittedly short list.

Rudy was texting Marin, who was in the venue still, waiting in line to use the bathroom before she herself entered the cold and forgot where she lived.

“Does Marin know what's wrong?” I asked

“She found out that guy she was talking to works in finance in the Loop,” Rudy responded.

That wasn't the answer I was looking for, but already I was desperate for any possibility. I thought it over, watching how the screen lit up Rudy's face in a way that made her look much younger. Maybe as young as when we'd just met and I'd glance over at her in the movie theater or someplace and think *this could be my future*. And it was, but the elements of what that future became had gotten mixed up somehow, soured. Our relationship had grown a puckered look about it, generally. Our apartment, for example, took the appearance of a hut with a dirt floor and a table spilling towers of mail. At night, two different beds held us in the same room, only partially because we both punched things in our sleep. We'd grown so polite, collapsing like mice as we passed each other in our one narrow hallway.

Back in the car, I kept the heat off, so we were bundled and clenching ourselves. It was a conservation measure—the battery had

to be the culprit, I was certain. But I didn't know anything, so I asked Ruby to hand me the manual from the glove box. I used any available light to find unfamiliar terms in the index and turned to the appropriate pages.

I'd read a few sentences, then get out the car to shake a wire or hand-tighten a bolt. Then I'd run back in and turn to the index again.

Ruby had met Marin in a class where they'd learned to knit washcloths. They used their time in class to stitch gifts for each other, infinite washcloths of sundry shapes and colors. Weekends, they'd meet for brunch, which would turn into stores and coffee and pre-dinner drinks, and dinner, and post-dinner drinks, and cab doors closing shut late below our apartment. Then there were the weekdays. Granted, they'd invite me along sometimes, but the names and situations they'd laugh over were as alien to me as baryonic matter. I'd stare at my Pad See Ew and mentally strategize my pending 401-k rollover. I was ready for change.

An hour passed. Or what felt like an hour.

"What time is it?" I asked Ruby, rubbing the grease from a lug nut on a Taco Bell napkin left over from our most recent road trip to her parents' Kansas townhouse.

"Hold on a sec," she said, laughing at the illuminated rectangle.

"Ruby..."

"I said hold...wait. What? Oh, it's 12:47."

Twelve minutes was all that had passed. Already I couldn't feel my fingers, but Ruby's were moving fast against the surface of her phone. Maybe the screen was warming them, the activity, the motion. She'd press a message in, then the phone would go dim for a second, then glow again. It was like a strobe light, I thought, stuck in an oil spill.

Never in the histories of strobe lights or oil spills has any strobe light ever gotten stuck in an oil spill, but the dumb connection in my head made me jump out of the car again, the manual spilling into slush. The oil! I'd never checked the oil.

I told Ruby I was going to check it quick, and if it wasn't that, we could call a cab to take us home and worry about it all tomorrow.

The cap took some effort to get off, thanks to the Puerto Rican brothers I paid to change my oil every 9,000 miles. The streetlamps were wholly ineffective to check the level, so I bent my head down and placed my eye right against the hole. I expected some colony of darkness, some species of emptiness, but I saw bright cool blue water. There were red rocks at the bottom of it, in which sat neon green and fuchsia coral that looked like feathers and brains. Moving around in the water were oversized tropical fish: skinny Bichir, albino Angelfish, delicate Molies, gemmed Danios. More and more kept appearing, different kinds, all rubbing past each other. Golden White Clouds and Clown Loaches. The water became all scintillation and fins. Bubbles collected rapidly at the surface.

I stood staring in for a while, moving my feet, tapping the numbness out. The horn exploded right next to my head. Curving around the raised hood, I saw Ruby with her phone lit again, or still, then it went black. I walked over to the passenger side and said through the closed window, "It's not that. I checked. That seems just fine. Something else must be wrong. I don't know what it could be."

She started to respond, but the phone brightened. The light deafened her expression and took command of her eyes. I walked back to check the oil again, to make sure I hadn't been seeing things wrong.

