

Minneapolis

by Paul de Denus

Through a rusted hole in the floorboard, I can see the icy blacktop running away beneath us. It looks alive; passing headlights reflect the surface, an oily black serpent sliding quickly past while we sit frozen, speeding toward the border. Seth, the driver, a sometimes acquaintance, has coaxed me to come along; these other two passengers are strangers to me. The antsy one, Cal, rocks nervously, arms encircled around his raised knees as he moves back and forth, back and forth blathering childish nonsense about what awaits us down south. JT, intelligent, cocky - - I can tell - - sits stone still in the front passenger seat; he's the kind that women like, chiseled looks and a killer black beard that shrouds his entire face. He will later claim he knows nothing of the girl's disappearance and that I was the last one seen with her, which will unfortunately be true but not the real story...

the car sped through the night,
snow falling weightless
like ticker tape confetti.
we sat in silence drifting to the crackle
of FM radio, around midnight,
pulling into a roadside motel.

the EL RIO, it said on half-lit neon,
the 'VACANCY' sign reading, VAC - - C -
vac-c-nation, Seth said, parking the beater.
got your vac-c-nations '- gonna' need 'em!
Cal whooped with childish excitement
like we'd just arrived at the circus.

a tattered bar hung on
the west corner of the motel,

a few cars parked in front.
its sign winked 'Open' and JT headed for it.
Cal loped after him like a lost pup
skidding across the snow.

we'll get a couple of rooms, Seth called
but they didn't look back.
the snow had let up
but not the arctic wind
and we hustled inside
to register.

JT and Cal sat near the door,
a couple of beers already
half empty in front of them.
I pulled up a chair, Seth looked for the john.
there 'aint no waitress, JT said,
nodding toward the bar.

two men hunched separate
on barstools
staring into the back-bar mirror of bottle
and glass oblivion.
they looked the usual types
found in dives - - drunks, truckers
sales men in crumpled suits running
from crumpled lives.
I grabbed a couple of beers
from the lone bartender.

two women sat slouched in the corner,
one looking as old as the beaten bar
the other maybe high school age
and they giggled and whispered and eyed us
as they pulled long draws

from their tall bottles.

did you see the sluts at that table? Cal said.
young one's mine.
reminds me of that ex-girlfriend of yours, JT said,
the one who laid those charges on you.
fuck that, Cal said, rocking in his chair,
fists nervously pounding his knees.

what was this? Seth asked.
bullshit court charge
they threw out.
what kind of charge?
cunt said I beat on her.
diiiiiiiiid yoooooou? JT said, his voice a ghost smile.

he glared at the bartender.
four beers,
index finger twirling in a circle
and them in the corner too, his dark eyes burning
intense, causing the bartender to take
a long step back.

he and Cal joined the women without invitation
and the giggling increased two fold.
they'll end up like my sister
Seth said, watching the foursome over the tilt of his bottle.
she took off at fifteen
and never came back.

she'd call sometimes to lie...
about her life.
said she worked in a bar.
she worked the bar alright.
I know what she was.

it destroyed our mother.
I watched his face change.
you haven't heard from her recently?
she's dead, murdered,
in a shithole like this.

a worn-out pool table
waited for someone to roll on it.
Seth picked up the cue,
and slammed balls into the pockets.
I do play hardball, he sneered, eyeing the bartender.
anyone want some?

not me, I said.
the place was empty now,
save the seven of us.
I took a seat along the battered bar.
got anything to eat?
just chips and peanuts, the bartender said.

you all from around here?
up north, I said.
never been, too cold.
yeah, well we're just warming up.
I'm Ben.
pleasure's mine... I'm Andy.

the cackling grew louder from the corner table
accompanied by the occasional thunder-smack of
angry stripes and solids rolling.
Seth glowered at us in a half-light
as I leaned in and bent Andy's ear.
in the corner, JT and Cal slowly took down their prey.

I don't remember much of the rest.

I was the last one out,
stumbling back to the room, hot, drunk,
alone.

JT, Cal and Seth had disappeared hours before
with the two girls.

I then remember Seth knocking
past me as I opened the door
of our room, mumbling
he'd be right back.

I do remember washing up,
cold water
on my face cooling me down.
after that it's blank.

I must have
passed out.

the police stand as bookends
next to the bed
one tall, one taller.
my head is pounding
and I want to puke.
what...?

tell us what happened
to the girl, the taller cop says.
yes, what can you tell us about the girl,
from the shorter cop.
anything you tell us will be helpful.
I need to vomit.

my guts want to spill.
the door is open
out to the hallway.
I can hear soft crying, loud voices

and hard words like **blood**
and **slaughter**.

the two women,
JT and Cal,
Seth?
my stomach churns
I can taste the bile
rising.

did you ask my friends?
my stomach lurches.
we've talked to them, the tall cop says.
they told us
to talk
to you.

the short cop — seems you were last seen with her.
the tall cop— yes, according to your friend JT.
the short cop - tell us what happened between
you and the girl?
the tall cop— yes, this girl... Andrea Shepard.
I don't know any...
the short cop — yes, Andrea Shepard,
the bartender
in little pieces
next door.

