

James Dean

by Tyler Koch

The woman lit a cigarette and sat on the edge of the bed, crossing one leg over the other. She took a long drag, tilted her head back, paused. Her eyes flicked to the NO SMOKING sign on the back of the hotel room door. The barest hint of a smile played at her lips. She breathed out slowly through her nose.

“You want one?” she asked.

“Sure.”

She reached for her purse on the ground, next to her clothes, his clothes, his briefcase, and food still warm in the to-go box.

“Here.”

The man leaned forward and took the cigarette. But he didn't light it. He put the cigarette in his mouth and left it there, dangling from his lips like he was James Dean. The woman thought about saying something but didn't. Instead she found a coffee mug to use as an ashtray.

“I'm quitting soon,” she said to nobody in particular. “I'm going to use the patch. I'm down to one cigarette a day.”

“That's good.”

The woman nodded absently, blowing smoke out the side of her mouth. She knew the man was watching her, and she turned so he could have a better view of her breasts. He said her breasts were his favorite feature, after her eyes.

“What time do you have to be back?” she asked.

“Not for an hour yet. You?”

“I'm off the rest of the day.”

The man took the cigarette out of his mouth and turned it between his fingers. The woman had seen him do it before. She'd even tried to do it herself when she was alone but somehow the trick didn't look the same. Something about the way his fingers moved she couldn't mimic.

“I used to watch my dad do this,” he said. “He had a cigarette on each ear, one in his mouth, and one like this. He'd smoke them all after dinner, saving the one on his fingers for last. He said he enjoyed that one the best.”

The woman breathed out slowly, the smoke forming a cloud in front of her. The man returned the cigarette to his lips. There he was, James Dean again, if James Dean was balding and twenty pounds overweight. Well, he might have been if he lived long enough. It was easy to be optimistic about life in your twenties. She was beautiful then. She liked going fast, staying out late, feeling immortal. She remembered the exact moment that all changed. Her boyfriend at the time, Tony—Italian Tony, she called him—took her to coffee. Just coffee. Nothing special, nothing attached. They woke up late on a Saturday and he asked her, “Hey babe, do you want coffee?” They stood at the crosswalk waiting for the light to change. He was a foot in front of her, his hands in his pockets. There was a loud scream and sounds of broken glass and she remembered feeling weightless. She never forgot that feeling. Weightless. Like she was floating above the ground with nothing to keep her there. They pronounced Tony dead at the scene. They took her to the hospital and released her three days later.

“Do you want to eat?”

“What?” she asked.

“Do you want to eat?”

She snubbed the cigarette in the coffee mug.

“You can. I'm not hungry just yet.”

“I'll wait then.”

He said all this slightly slurred, with the cigarette hanging from his lips.

She crawled back into bed next to him, on top of the sheets. Next to James Dean. The room was cool and gooseflesh freckled her skin, caused her nipples to harden. But she was comfortable here. It was quiet. She was safe. Sometimes she thought she could stay like this forever, lying naked in bed.

“Do you ever think about the past?” she asked.

"Sometimes. I think about my children. I wonder where they are."

"You don't talk to them anymore?"

He took the cigarette out of his mouth and placed it behind his ear.

"I do. I meant more what they're thinking about."

"They're teenagers. Do you remember what you were thinking about as a teenager?"

"I remember what I was thinking, but not necessarily why."

The woman smiled, her eyes still closed. She wondered that about him too, her James Dean. Not what he was thinking about but why. Not what he was doing here, but why he was here. She wasn't bothered by the fact they only saw one another in hotel rooms. She wasn't that much of a hypocrite. But they never talked about the why. It was probably better that way. Easier.

"Your daughter won't be a teenager for much longer."

The man blew out a long breath of air, as though exhaling from a long drag.

"It's easy to forget we were that young once."

"I remember what it felt like to be that young."

"Do you?" he asked. "What do you remember?"

But the woman didn't answer.

The man took the cigarette from his ear and turned it between his fingers.

"Are you hungry?" she asked. "I'm ready to eat."

The meal was what they always ordered: salad, chicken fingers, French fries. They spread out the food on the bed and ate with their fingers. When they were done the man stood and threw away the trash.

"I have to get back soon," he said.

"I know."

She looked at his naked form before her, as he walked to her side of the bed and put on his clothes. He buttoned his shirt

one button at a time, methodically, but when he went to tighten his belt he put a hand on his stomach and sighed.

"It's alright," she said.

"This is what I remember about being young," he said.

She smiled and pictured him in his prime, without the balding and the extra weight and the wrinkles. James Dean. That's who he might have been. But even James would have gotten old eventually. Only death immortalized the young.

"We shouldn't do this anymore," he said.

It had become their phrase, and they both smiled.

"Don't forget to open up the window."

"I won't," she said.

"Alright."

"I'll get the food next time. What do you want?"

"Steak and Shake."

"Okay."

He man walked forward and held out his hand. The cigarette.

"Keep it," she said.

With a small smile he put the cigarette in his breast pocket and patted it. He didn't say goodbye as he walked out the door.

The woman closed her eyes and folded her hands on her stomach. She would leave soon, within the hour. She liked to stay a while after he left. She liked the smell his cologne left on the sheets, that mixed with her cigarette. She liked to feel his residual warmth in the bed next to her. She could almost forget she was in a hotel room at times like this. She could almost pretend she was weightless.

