

The Evans Harrington Creative Writing Scholarship

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in the A.M.

I WAS DRIVING FROM Aberdeen all the way to Red Banks, one middle of nowhere to the next. My boyfriend said it made no sense that we both lived in such similar towns and yet couldn't live together; one of us should move to the other, it would basically be the same town anyways. But I didn't want to give up my home as I knew it, nor did he. So we made the drives, me more often than him, until we could find a town in the middle of nowhere that meant nothing to both of us.

I always went late at night, much to everyone I know's chagrin. I was told to stop, because I guess they all feared I'd wind up on the news—crash, kidnapping, strange paranormal activities. But I liked it enough, much as you can like a drive that looks the same for a hundred miles. One hundred and four tonight, as I had to take a construction detour this time. Still, it was quick and quiet, me alone with my thoughts speeding through the countryside. And if I couldn't stand my thoughts, I turned to the radio.

Dwight Yoakam crooned at me softly as I pressed the AM button. The old country was fine in the daytime but I loved to peruse the independent radio stations. Seemed all the people too shy to come out in the day had their spotlight. Even the bozo on the bus can have a very interesting look on life when given a mic and able to project for an audience unseen.

For some reason though, tonight I couldn't tune in. That's the thing, most of the jockeys owe no one anything so they don't have to have a show. Some are actual shows, syndicated or whatnot, and those are pretty reliable. But I guess I couldn't find them. I was especially anxious now, as this detour seemed much longer than it said it was. That was always the one downside; it is much easier to do construction in the middle of the night on a highway. I trusted the men in the orange vests but my phone didn't and kept trying to reroute me. Until of course I lost service, and I began to panic just a bit. The trees were all the same, towering and dark, feeling more and more like walls enclosing me and the road. The one that was beginning to look more and more like it was the road less traveled, with its chipping road paint and host of potholes.

That is until I saw a billboard tucked into a small clearing, illuminated by a single flickering light, bold black letters fading onto wood painted white, all of it beginning to peel off:

YOUR TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE

AM 1620

And what did I have to lose? I needed to calm down anyways. I turned the dial to hear static, then it slipped into the audio. A crackle came over as the disembodied voice boomed at me and said "Good evening folks. Suppose good morning, as it's just now midnight. It seems you've tuned in, whether on purpose or not. We're here to speak on the truth, the light. Perhaps you're seeking salvation. Perhaps this is your divine intervention. Like when Jesus appeared to Saul and Saul became Paul. Became a new man."

Ah, great. A preacher. Sure encountered enough of those in my time hunting the radio. Sometimes they have an inspirational message, sometimes something that seems...spiteful.

“Well folks, our subject matter today is love. We all love love huh? Love to *be* loved eh? But sometimes we don’t *love* loving one another do we? That’s the problem today, everyone wants to be loved without having to love.”

Sure, but I wouldn’t be making the drive if I didn’t love my boyfriend, right?

“We do find ourselves to love many things though. We love our new clothes and our neighbor’s new house. We love drinking on the weekend and complaining on the weekday. We love the things that we shouldn’t. Things that are ephemeral in the worst ways. Adrenaline rushes that never really satisfy us. All the hedonists and the hippies, huh?”

Hedonists and hippies. Sure. Jesus was probably the biggest hippie anyways. I reached for the dial, sick of whatever this could be.

“Just like that little boyfriend of yours, huh?”

I perked up, my hand hovering over the dial until I slowly eased it back to the steering wheel. The one I was gripping a little harder now. As I continued on the road, a billboard popped up again, the same style as the former. Chipped and weathered lettering barely lit up.

YOUR LIES WILL CONSUME YOU

AM 1620

“Yes, yessuh, we love ourselves some bad things that mean good times. Looking over at that glimmering wedding band, saying it doesn’t mean anything anyways. your spouse isn’t your best friend anymore, and you got a lot of new best friends to make.”

I glanced over to the cupholder, a gold band and a diamond ring bouncing gently with the dips in the road. Another billboard came into view, the same peeling paint.

THEY ALL KNOW THE TRUTH

AM 1620

“How sad that you don’t love him anymore. Tragic, even. But does that give you the right to sneak off, right under his nose? And I’ll tell you what, I think he knows his suspicions are right. You think he isn’t nervously twiddling that ring around his finger, telling himself not to reach for the phone? Oh you can say you’re driving to clear your mind. Get that creative spark for work. But an odometer don’t lie, nor does needing gas every couple days. You can go late when you think blinds are closed, but nobody ever shuts them completely in a small town.

“You see, everyone does bad things. But some of us make quiet theater about our bad things. Loud tiptoeing and unhushed whispers, yessuh. Like bragging about how many secrets you can keep, it just contradicts the whole point. The ruse is done and the jig is up or all those other sayings, and it’s time to just wear your scarlet letter around town. What do you think, Lily?”

I gasped. The voice began to cut out as static replaced his rapidly crackling voice, tears welling in my eyes and my throat felt like it was closing from the shock. I rolled down my windows, gasping for air.

“Who are you? How do you know me?” I shouted into the dark abyss of the backwoods. The static faded out as his voice came through again.

“Oh Lily. You don’t love that little boyfriend of yours. You just love that someone actually maybe loves you. If you could call it that. And you’ll tire of him soon enough too. Yes, yes, I know it’s hard. Playing two characters at once. By day, sweet hometown wife to some

boring man you don't remember loving. He may not be good for you, but you aren't good for him either. And every couple of nights getting to be Cinderella, where you dress up and pretend you're some prince's princess. But only for the night. That isn't love, you know that. This routine of yours is getting old to everyone, especially your husband. You'll never be free will you?"

He paused. I realized I had been holding my breath, and as I forced myself to let it out, it came out as a whimper.

"But you could be. Couldn't you?" He said, a gentleness now present in his tone.

His voice morphed into static once again, a low screeching echoing through the car.

I looked up at an approaching billboard, the single light a little brighter than that which illuminated the three previous ones. There was a faded young blonde woman on it holding a notepad and a company logo next to it, her smile and hair almost the same color due to weathering.

IT'S TRUE! STARTING HOURLY RATES
ARE \$16-20

Huh. I looked down at the clock. 11:59PM. *Huh.*

Sighing, maybe from exhaustion, that post-adrenaline numbness, I kept driving down the road, my eyes settling into a distant stare. Not looking at the road or the trees or anything I should be keeping my eye on, but just...just to calm down. I loosened my grip on the wheel and unclenched my jaw.

I noticed though that the road slowly began to look fresher, with brighter white paint and visibly newer asphalt. It curved around until I came to a stop sign that put me back on the highway.

Right for Red Banks, left for Aberdeen.