

How To Grow Up · *Leslie Pietrzyk*

THERE WAS THIS BAR I used to go to when I was in high school. I called it the Silver Sperm, but it was really called the Silver Spur and it sat along State Route 67, at the place where when you were winding back after a day in Phoenix you caught first sight of the lights of Perry dropped like a mess into the mountains, and you'd think, "Lord, I need a shot of something." And just around the next curve, there it was, an oasis that nearly put you in mind to trust in the power of God.

The building was one of those metal jobs that someone had carted here from Phoenix, dragged through the mountains behind a big truck. Nearly everything in Perry came from Phoenix: food, furniture, government checks — everything except the people, who were born tick-tock in the San Juan Valley hospital down the hill by the laundromat. It doesn't sound very glamorous, four clunky tin walls slapped together by a couple of construction guys heading into overtime, complaining about the heat dropping like bricks off the sun; nothing but a crummy bar planning to keep a couple yards outside city limits. This was a bar to drown in, to be sucked under as the air circled thick and heavy. I started going when I was fifteen. If it had happened another way the first time, maybe I wouldn't have gone back. Maybe I would have turned out to be a different kind of person. Maybe.

That first time, I walked out there keeping my head low, watching the road sideways for headlights that would scoop me up like a smashed moth and carry me back to Perry. I froze whenever I heard someone coming; it's instinct in jackrabbits so I gave it a try-out, even hunching up the way they do and it worked fine. No one noticed me.

I paused at the door, my heart beating so loud I couldn't think how to get inside and why I was there. There was only one tiny window in the front, twitching with the red and blue neon of a beer sign, and I let that hypnotize me into feeling brave, and the door sprung open, someone, I didn't look who, stepped out, and I stepped inside, pressing up against the dark, waiting for something maybe familiar. I saw some of my classmates' fathers, but they weren't their loose, stupid selves; instead they'd knotted around the pool table, the place where all the light in the room skrunched to, and together they made the balls smack and click and the cues flashed

long and their voices pushed forward like whatever it is that finally gets all the petals off a prickly pear blossom. I didn't let them see me, not that they would have wanted to.

The song playing was one I'd heard more than enough times on the radio; the cheese grater of a voice worked hard against my spine, straightening me up. Then one of the fathers shoved over to the jukebox and slammed it hard with a sideways foot. The song dribbled into nothing, and someone swore, but the dancing couple kept pressed up close, rocking like a pendulum.

This is where I wanted to be, this place where I didn't yet know the rules.

"Hey, how old is she?" I heard someone at the bar say, and knowing they were talking about me, I turned to look. It was another knot of men, boys really who had only recently decided they were men. I didn't speak, just let them look me over like I was something on a menu, an item not the cheapest, but not the most expensive, either. This is the way I remembered men watching my older sister but when she was younger, before she reached high school. I knew her pattern, how she'd smile sweet, shake the shine down her hair, bend the right way until someone separated from the pack and walked up to her. But I was different already. For example, she wouldn't come alone to a place like this.

So I waited a moment, and then I stepped up to the bar. I spoke only to the bartender: "Rum and Coke." His wife served lunch in the school cafeteria, easing squares of jello onto our plastic trays. I threw mine away every day, and even after I told her this, she made me take the jello so I'd have good, strong fingernails. And now I associate rum and Coke with wobbling, half-melted school jello, and maybe that's why I bite my nails.

Then I pushed my drink to the end of the bar where I could take a good look at it all if I turned around. The men's eyes stayed pinned on. That wasn't really why I'd come. Maybe a little it was. But I pretended to myself it wasn't.

I didn't like living in Perry, never had. Living in Perry was like watching stillness. Even the sky above seemed glued into place. A rainy day was the only way to break the spell. A steady rain could drive the stillness into the ground, at least until the sun drew it back up. Think of how you think the last day of the world will be and how all you'll feel is the fear of the wind, unable to move. That was Perry for me.

So I went to places like the Silver Spur and did the things I did. The rum and Coke traveled down like cough syrup with a sugary sort of falseness. It was my sister's drink. She would let her boyfriends mix her one inside a Coke bottle. All the girls did that. It was stupid.

"What are you doing here?" One of the men stood next to me, one boot propped up onto the bottom bar rail so I could see that it was a Tony Lama, so I might think, Those boots cost three hundred dollars. Instead I looked at my drink, imagining I could watch water trickle off the ice cubes and spread a net into the dark liquid. When was the last moment an ice cube was ice before melting?

"What are you doing here?" he repeated.

It was part of a different language. He really didn't want to know what I was doing here, really didn't care.

I secretly glanced up at his face, swished the ice around my glass. His eyes were fixed above my head counting moments, tick-tock, tick-tock, but his face was perfect, a stalking cat narrowing in until there's one thing only.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. He scared me because his eyes wouldn't look at me and because I'd never noticed him around. And because I could already see his truck coasting down the hill to my parents' house, not flicking the brights around the corners like my father did, leaving me off not in the driveway, but along the street and not waiting around to watch me walk up to the door, not seeing me wave back to him from under the porch light. That would be the way he'd leave.

He shrugged. "It's Saturday night."

"Yeah," I said.

He raised his finger and the bartender nodded once. Then there were two drinks in front of us, rum and Coke for me and beer for him. "So," I said, but he didn't seem interested in whether something was going to follow so I clamped it in.

My sister had never brought anyone like this to our house. Her boyfriends were interchangeable with the models in the Sears catalog. Lots of smiles. Polished shoes. She found them at the private boys' school down towards Phoenix. When she finished with one she'd move on to another then another. I couldn't keep them straight so I called them all, "Hey."

When she finished high school, my mother said, "Well, that's that," and it pretty much was. Sometimes one of the boys would call from the

school, someone younger who'd heard stories, but my sister wouldn't pick up the phone to talk. I was thirteen then, already smarter than she'll ever be.

"I'll take a tequila," I called to the bartender and he laughed.

"You got it honey," he said, and the group of men watched the quick llub-llub of liquor being poured. The bartender dropped a couple of lime chunks on a plate and brought me the plate and the shot glass. The group shifted closer. I didn't look at the man next to me; I lifted the shot glass and made the liquid swirl until some slopped onto my fingers. I'd never done this before.

"Salt first," the man said low and personal, and I wanted to hit myself. I knew that; I'd seen my father. So I rubbed a lime over the fleshy part between my thumb and finger and the man pushed the salt shaker over to me. I poured on too much so I shook some off onto the floor. Bad luck to spill, I thought, but did this count as spilling? I wrapped my other hand around the glass, wishing it felt cold and icy instead of like nothing, like emptiness, and dipped down, tongue out, to lick the salt. Before I could think, before I could ask what I was doing here, in one quick motion I moved my head up, set the edge of the glass onto my lips, and felt my head fall backwards so the heat would brand me all the way down my throat. My eyes watered and I plunged into a lime, sucking hard, clenching the fruit to my mouth. A jolt whacked my whole body, sent me into motion, made me feel I was about to spin free.

There was staccato applause, the kind that's done late at night in a dark room. Tick-tock, tick-tock, the hands moved over and over, so I threw down the lime, and the bartender brought me another shot.

I looked down and the man's hand was on my leg, his thumb rhythmically rubbing against the side seam of my jeans. I remember thinking, So this is how to grow up.