

JON BOILARD

The Train

WE SMOKE DOPE IN THE graveyard next to the stone marked Harry Arms. There's a cricket that sounds like a busted box spring. Shelly isn't wearing a bra and we bump against each other and when I finish I tell her about the train and she cries. At first she doesn't want me to leave. Then she wants to come with me. If I were old enough to legally drive a car, she could come. But hopping trains is not the kind of business a girl should get involved with. That's how I explain it. She cries some more. It seems like she's always crying about one thing or another. She scratches my name into her arm with a beer bottle cap where everybody can see. Stupid bitch. An early autumn breeze that smells like cow shit.

Get dressed.

I thought I'd be your girl forever, she says.

Forever is a long fuckin' time, Shell.

My old man gets drunk at the Bloody Brook Bar and locks me out of the apartment on purpose so I hotwire his F250 and drive it into the tri-town pond. Let him find it like that. I walk across Don Milewski's empty pumpkin patch. The side door of Boron's Market on Eastern Avenue is easy to jimmy and I need supplies for my train ride. I stuff a plastic trash bag with cupcakes, jerky and chocolate milk. A flashlight and batteries. A pouch of Red Man chewing tobacco. There's a dusty old cat with only one eyeball living in the back and he meows at me. He hisses and spits and I laugh at him.

You're only a cat and that's all you'll ever be.

I want to go to California but I don't even know what that means. I hide in a bush by the tracks. It will slow down to make the bend past Dry Run Bridge. I've seen it a million times. Raping Ray is drinking coffee in a styrofoam cup. I don't notice him at first. He walks quiet like an Indian. Nobody knows for sure if he did it or not and besides it was a long time ago and he's harmless now. I'm not scared of him. He asks me what I'm

doing. I tell him my plan. He says that it's the Boston and Maine line so I can only go north or south. Forget California. Maybe Canada. That's okay by me. A mosquito bites him on the neck and he slaps it against his skin and leaves a smudge. He sits on a stump.

How's your father, he says because they're the same age.

I hope he gets hit by a truck.

Raping Ray laughs hard and spills some coffee that stains his pant leg.

The train never comes. Motherfucker this and motherfucker that. Then my old man smacks me about the F250 and more when I deny it. He passes out on the green couch and I put all of his cigarettes in the toilet that doesn't work and has not been flushed in days. Shelly meets me at the Sunderland Creamy. She's happy that I didn't leave and she cries. We share a large vanilla cone. Then I steal somebody's two-tone El Camino to drive up Mount Toby. A giant tree casts a long shadow on a faded red barn. The letters of my name are scabs on her pale flesh. We get in the back seat and she begs me to leave it inside her and so I do. When I'm done it sounds like a cow pulling its foot out of the mud. She smiles white teeth. Van Halen is on the radio singing, "I got it bad."

If I have your baby then you gotta stay, she says.

If you do then I'll throw it in the river.

She cries.

My shift pumping gas starts at five. Eugene tells me that La Pinta wants to ask me about a certain F250 in a certain pond. I guess my old man called the cops. They towed it out and wanted to book him. Not only that but there is already a stack of DUIs. Then Janet from the pharmacy brings me a cheeseburger and fries for dinner. It's one of the perks. There is a busted button on her overalls and I can see a bit of her red nylon panties. I tell her about the train, too. We both get off at eight and so she comes by with strawberry frappes and I know exactly where Killer Kowalski hides a bottle of rotgut in his toolbox. I shut down the pumps and lock the doors and we sit in the office and drink brown booze and then I let her give me head. Sticks her gum behind her ear. Bobs on me with piston-like efficiency. I don't consider it cheating but Shelly might have a different opinion.



School is a joke. I get high with Shell out by the Dwire Lot during third period English. Bobcat and Rosey are there, too. We burn a fat one and laugh and listen to good kids playing tennis during gym class. Viola Goodnow is yelling instructions and Bob is impersonating her dead on.

Fucking hilarious. Instead of going back to class we hitchhike to Red Rock. We don't get a ride and it's a long walk down 116 and I tell Bobcat and Rosey about the train. Shelly cries when I say that I'm leaving her behind.

Jesus fuckin Christ, Shell, it's for your own good.



Bobcat's mom strips at The Shed. He doesn't like to talk about it. We steal some Swisher Sweets from my old man who is in a booze coma as usual. The Red Sox are on the tube. We go into the hall and climb out the window and onto the roof and the moon looks like a banana. You can still hear the TV because it's so loud. Bob has a half pint of blackberry brandy that he lifted from the paki. He takes a tug and gives it to me. Across the street there are some Puerto Ricans getting beat up in front of the Brook. Murph and a couple other guys from Double D's are really pissed about something and smashing bottles all over the poor spics. By the time Westy and LaPinta show up with the flashing lights everybody is gone and there is just a lot of broken glass and blood and somebody's torn shirt on the sidewalk. They look around and talk to Fydo who owns the place. Then the game ends because my old man turns the volume down. Bobcat blows smoke rings.

This place sucks, he says, meaning the Hot L roof, the town, the whole valley.

We stay quiet for a few beats to let his statement sink in.

Yeah I'm a hop that fuckin' train tomorrow, boy, I say.

It feels good to say it but Bobcat doesn't say anything back and he doesn't even look at me. I know he thinks I'll never do it. I spit over my shoulder and it lands on the ledge. The problem is that I already talked it to death. The idea. The concept of getting away. That's what happens sometimes when you put things into words; you kill them.



There is the smell of pickles from Oxford. Then I take my old man's F250 just back from the shop and drive it into the tri-town pond again. Janet is already there and we skinny dip. She asks me about the pickup and I tell her that I'm testing it for leaks. She laughs. The water is warm and the harvest moon is reflected in it. She tells me about her shift at the BP Diner. She's trying to save money for college. We swim to the middle and sit on the floating dock. I kiss her and she tastes like deep fried onion rings. Then

we swim to the rope swing and take turns diving and flipping. She's very athletic for a girl and can almost do everything that I can do. We end up back on the beach. There's some weed that I bought from Skidmark Syska and we torch a doobie under the white lifeguard chair. She asks me about the train. She says that she can totally picture me hanging out in California and then she uses her mouth on me again. Afterward she sits there like just any other small-town whore and I skip a flat rock on the smooth black surface of the pond.

I hear Shelly went to the clinic, she says, her eyes wide-set like a plastic doll's.

You hear loads of stupid shit if you listen long enough.



Chuck Smiaroski says he's going to dock my pay for being late. I tell him that my old man crashed the F250 again so I had to walk to the farm but Chuck doesn't care because he's a redneck asshole. Then I cut field tobacco until noon and then Bobcat comes to get me. He tells me Chuck has been bitching all morning and wants to shitcan me. Fuck him that Polish fuck. We use pitchforks to load up brown heads of cabbage that they can use for relish at Oxford. The sun is crazy hot and I take my t-shirt off and put it in my back pocket. Bob has a water jug in the Chevy and he gets it for me. We just stand there for a minute. There are bugs flying into my ears and eyes and nose and I shoo them away. Chuck pays cash on Fridays and he makes a big point of holding some of mine back. He tells me that I need an attitude adjustment. I tell him to fuck off. I tell him about the train.

See I don't need your nigger job, I say.

Oh yah? Hey, I used to have big dreams too, kid. He laughs when he says it.

He adjusts his balls and laughs and spits yellow over his shoulder and gives us a six-pack of Budweiser and tells us not to drink it all in one place. Bobcat has his mom's T-bird and we drive around listening to Billy Squier until he has to get it back so she can get to The Shed on time. He says that Philo Reno gave his mom a black eye the last time she was late. He drops me off at the common exactly when there's a train running due north. Bob waves and pulls away and I stand in the middle of the street. Brake lights and he waits at the crossing. Puffs of white smoke rise like seven little ghosts escaping from the tail pipe. I count and watch them disappear. Sense that he is watching me in the rearview. That he expects me to do something. Anything. But I am frozen. Then the train is too fast and loud and it shakes

everything in town even me. And then the red and white painted arms go up and the orange light stops flashing and Bobcat drives off real slow.



I hit her and it feels good. Shelly cries of course and I say there's a first time for everything. My old man laughs until he spits blood when I tell him that she's knocked up.

Holy shit boy [cough] you done did her this time [cough cough cough spit].

He reminds me that I was an accident too. That's always been very clear to me.

Shelly's too far along to get it taken care of and her parents kick her out of the house when she starts to show. I tell her it's probably not even mine and she gets sick on my steeltoe boots. She goes to live with her aunt with the horse farm in Shelburne Falls.



Bobcat can't believe my luck. We get shitfaced and drive around town and up past the river and over Stillwater Bridge and down Old Hoosac's Road. He parks in the corn for a minute so we can piss and he gets his brother's shotgun from the trunk and we sit back in the car and then we shoot out some streetlights and put four holes in the stop sign at 116 and Sawmill Plain. Then there's a party on Bull Hill and we stand around the bonfire that smells like burning tires. Janet is there with her new boyfriend from the Shutesbury AC. She gives me a sideways look because I never called her like I promised. But I never call anybody. Bobcat laughs and I laugh too even though I don't mean it as much as he does.

How was your big train ride, she says too loud.

All eyes are on me.

Shutesbury really sizes me up, a wad of chew under his bottom lip.

He lets go a stream of brown saliva that hits the dirt.

That boy there ain't goin nowhere, he says.

You can hear a pin drop for a few heartbeats.

Then everybody laughs as though I'm the biggest joke in town. Bobcat slaps me on the back. Minutes pass like one of Max Ante's eighteen-wheelers. Black smoke all around makes it hard to breathe. Whosever bright idea it was to burn Eagle GTs. People start to leave. You can hear engines turning and car radios cooing Bryan Adams and Janet is sitting right up against her

new boyfriend in his shiny new GMC and they are trying to pass, if I'd just get out of the way. Vehicles line up behind him and he shines his brights on me and punches his horn and I just stand there and close my eyes. Bobcat is trying to say something but I can barely hear him. Shelly called from a payphone the other night to tell me it's a boy and she's going to name him after me, which is some fucked up shit. As far as I'm concerned, my name is just a bunch of little white scars on her arm. Somewhere behind me a train whistle blows, long and low. A farm dog answers the train and then a second dog joins in. They sing out like that for a long time. And when their voices fade away and I open my eyes I'm alone. It's quiet as a dream. The train is gone.

