

Night on the Susquehanna

At midnight the river turned to a slick sheet of diamonds, reflecting the city's lights back across Front Street onto brick and stone. Eddie drank too much Friday night and found his car dancing along the thin strip of grass and sidewalk just touching the river's edge. Later he swore it wasn't a road but the middle of the ocean and he couldn't tell which way to safety. The Susquehanna tricked him, mirroring back a perfect replica of Harrisburg onto its surface with treacherous details like an old fat cat cleaning its paws down some back alley. Eddie closed his eyes and guessed which way the city was, his car flip flopping carelessly down steep banks into the water. Paramedics later said it was a miracle in his state he remembered to open the door and although unconscious floated back face up to the bubbly surface. And afterwards, when he slept on his left side he swore he was still drowning.

The band didn't want to let their drummer go, but he was in the hospital for a week recovering while they monitored the efficiency of his lungs, checked his vitals on streamlined machines that let out everything's ok beeps every minute or so. Once he was home he didn't turn when I called to him right away. His motions were shadows of what they used to be, this all before he ever picked back up his drumsticks. Tony finally called the fourth night Eddie was home.

"How's he doing?" As lead singer, he had a duty to perform for the band.

"Ok, better every minute." I hadn't invited anyone over, afraid they might notice the little discrepancies I had. Regardless, there hadn't been many requests to visit either.

"What about the show in Lancaster next week, we need practice." He paused, but only for a few seconds. "Do I need to call another drummer?"

Eddie was up in the sunroom when I got off the phone, tapping on the desk facing out the window to our neighbors' pool and lilacs buzzing bright with tiny yellow jackets.

He didn't hear me come in, and for a minute I watched him, wondering if I'd done the right thing by telling Tony he'd be back.

"Eddie," I yelled. "The band needs to know what's goin' on." He smiled up and shook his head a little, a shake reserved for after swimming when water trapped itself in their inner ear.

"Sure," he spoke calmly. "I'll head over now for practice. Could you drive me?" He was still afraid of the car, even though it hadn't failed him anymore than the bartender down at Gabe's that kept pouring southern comfort in tall shot glasses for the price of the small ones.

I wanted to say no and tell him wasn't going to play again, not with the way he'd been acting. Instead I dutifully pulled out a coat and shoes for him like he was a child, kneading his shoulders with my fists to relax the long muscles down his back and help him prepare. It took only six blocks and five minutes to Tony's house, but we drove eleven to avoid the river, all the while his drumsticks a frantic speedometer traveling up and down the dash. The beats hit their marks, precise and hard, but somehow Eddie's rhythm had fallen off.

"I'll call you on your cell when we're done." Eddie shuffled to the cellar door, a boy on his way to the first day of school making sure to kick all the pebbles and twigs off the path.

The phone rang as I fumbled with keys to get back into the house. He was sitting out on the stoop alone, and music filtered up through a small window at the base of the townhouse. It didn't take them long to realize what I had two days into his homecoming.

"My sound's all off. They're gonna go ahead without me." Eddie leaned towards the window next to him in the car as if his equilibrium had been effected to. That or he just needed to move as far away from the Susquehanna River as possible. Either way I worried that he wouldn't be all right without the band. We went to the bedroom and he

drummed into me harder than usual, angry and lost.

“I could start my own band.” He lied worse than he made love to me that night. I saw the wrinkles around his lower lip curling into tiny loops. I kissed his spine, vertebrae after vertebrae, following the bumps down until I made a sharp right and rested my head in his lap.

“It’s not over. You just need to get better.” I became the river’s co-conspirator, trying to hide its damages with false promises.

“It feels like I’m in a tornado, the notes just get turned around in my head. It’s temporary.” He sat back into the pillow, pushing hard to make the storm in his body recede.

With my advertising job, we didn’t miss the hundred dollars or so a week Eddie brought home from the band’s gigs around town. Eddie tried to write songs, and I heard him throw the sticks back and forth across his practice room, once so hard he smashed a window. I taped newspaper over the hole as a quick fix until we could get a new pane. Some days he started to sound better, and he even picked up the old jazz guitar he’d played during college freshman year, writing pieces here and there that reminded me of the deep little sets of clubs in bigger cities. Other days he couldn’t hear me when I snuck in to watch him try and fail at melodies, but once in awhile I got the notion that he did hear me and was too embarrassed to answer. He played hanging his body in different positions across the stools, hoping that maybe by leaning to the left everything inside him could be held together enough to get through the riff.

Right before the second worse night in Eddie’s life (the first being his swerve into the river), he fought against nasty rain outside to sleep. It was heavy and penetrating, pushing the river over its edge into the city, flooding peoples’ basements and forcing strays outside to head to higher ground.

“I can still feel myself floating in the fucking river.” Eddie spoke into the back of

my neck. “If I hadn’t been wasted I would have tried to swim and probably killed myself.”

“If you hadn’t been drunk you wouldn’t have lost it in the car. It doesn’t matter, you’re here.” I couldn’t bring myself to say he was ok, but being present and alive counted for enough. Without my husband, I didn’t have a future to look ahead to. There were things more powerful in the world than the river to fix Eddie, death-dry deserts and doctors of every flavor.

“I don’t drink anymore, do I? Let’s go out tomorrow night.”

We’d avoided the bars, never knowing where the band might be. Eddie couldn’t bring himself to look at their old website or see who’d replaced him. But it was time so we both dressed up, putting on our best faces the next night in case we saw people who wondered what had happened or might shoot their mouth off mourning Eddie’s lost career. I hadn’t quite decided if his body was broken or fear he’d never had before had made a home in him. Fear killed men faster than broken bones or midnight drives into swirling rivers. We walked in early, ducking to miss the low doorhang. Gabe’s occupied an old house with narrow doors and low ceilings. It pushed the smoke and warmth back down onto its customers like a blanket. The booths on the side were covered in green vinyl, and Eddie headed to them while I ordered drinks from the bar, a coke for him and a martini for me. Tony came over while the others were setting up equipment in the back.

“What’s goin’ on?” He slid his arm onto my shoulder, and I shrugged it down my back.

“Eddie’s fine. You could’ve called.” The decision to find a new drummer was disloyal, but the idea that his three best friends never asked any questions after discarding him was unforgivable. It just substantiated their images as self-serving bar scum.

“Tonight’s a bad night for you to be here.” Tony threw a ten onto the counter

when the waitress brought my drinks. She snatched it into the register before I could say no. “We have an announcement.”

“Good for you,” I didn’t think to ask what. I wanted to usher Eddie out down to another bar, but he stayed glued to our booth, even after watching Tony whisper things to me. He took his coke down in two gulps, eyeing the martini and rubbing my knee.

“So what’d he have to say?” Eddie was cut off by Tony on the mike. I wondered why he hadn’t waited to let me try and maneuver my husband elsewhere.

“Thanks everybody for coming out. We just started work last week on our CD, so hit our website to preorder.” Tony grinned into familiar darkness. That was his job as a lead singer, connect with everyone and no one in a single smile.

Eddie flicked my martini hard enough that the clear contents spilled, soiling the table with cheap vodka.

“Those are gonna be my fucking songs on the CD.” He watched Tony out of the corner of his eye, pushing hard against the booth to stand. “Let’s go home.”

I ran to catch up. He propelled himself towards the car, tilting slightly to the right. I worried he’d topple over, but he made it to the car and looked back at me.

“Toss me the keys.”

The metal chunks jingled and hovered up in the air for a second, the little blinking alarm light twinkling with the few stars peeking out through summer haze. Eddie jumped to grab them and vaulted himself down into the driver’s side. I wondered what he was trying to prove. We drove straight for the river, safely on the right side of the road with a lane of traffic between us and the Susquehanna.

“There have to be specialists that can help me, somewhere. I need my music.” He held the wheel tight with both hands navigating through more than the scary riverfront road. For the first time in weeks, I held onto his shoulder for balance.

Later that year we realized Eddie would always slightly tilt, that his hearing might

never be perfect again but he could still write music with practice and help. He gave up the drums to focus on guitar, picking at little melodies in the mornings and pushing out hard bass lines at night for our neighbors and midnight joggers to hear. Tony, Sal and Jay made their CD with a new drummer, but it never sold to anyone but a few die-hard fans locally. Sal's left the band and we saw Jay a few weeks back up in Lancaster waiting tables in a dirty little bar with only a broken down jukebox and plenty of smoke. Eddie ordered one of their cd's over the internet under a fake name to listen to what he used to have. He stopped sleeping on his right side, no longer fighting to hold everything together. In a few weeks he's heading downtown to start recording his own album, a demo to send out and see what happens.