

Retrograde

He tried to deny their allure, but those harbingers of relief in the green and white box vowed to alleviate his midnight tremors. He tipped the box, tapped flecks of tobacco into his hand, and raised a cupped palm to his nose. When he inhaled, his shoulders twitched, eyelids fluttered. He blew the flecks from his hand and watched them disappear into the carpet at the foot of the bed, like distant moons fading into the umbra of a new and mysterious planet. Last time, he'd gone cold turkey. For about an hour and a half. This time, he thought he'd try to wean himself slowly. Again, he looked in the box. Only three left. He'd never last the night.

At nine o'clock in the evening, far past the time when Casington was in full-swing for retirees, Frank sat at the counter, watching Ted pour another cup of coffee. As Ted turned to place the pot back on its hotplate pedestal, Frank looked at the towering rows of nicotine gum stacked behind the register. He'd quit smoking before. Surely, he could do it again. What worried him, though, was the hunger, the way he constantly felt famished even as he stuffed his face full of Ted's week-old apple pie and cardboard-flavored doughnuts. If it weren't for the hunger, he could probably quit without a problem. The coughing was bad, too, but it stopped eventually. Maybe he was just too old now. His lungs wouldn't recover the way they had when Julia had asked him to quit, when he was only twenty-two. The smoke bothered her allergies. It had been easy. Now, the thought of quitting was absurd. Except for those brief moments of

certainty when he thought – knew – he could do it, when he consciously opted not to buy a new pack, only to curse his own stupidity within a few short hours.

Ted was talking, droning out recollections of his days as a sturdy young man with a full head of hair. He told of girls he'd taken to drive-ins, a different girl each Saturday, each Monday returning to school to tell of a great lay. Frank remembered Ted much differently – an awkward young man, too skinny and tall, returning from weekend exploits with nothing more than a detailed lie.

“I don't want to hear any more of your damn stories,” Frank said. He clinked his coffee cup onto its saucer, spilling a few drops of precious, appetite-suppressing caffeine, and pointed to a large tray of doughnuts beneath a plastic dome.

Ted lifted the dome, motioning with white plastic tongs, first to the plain glazed, then to the jelly-filled.

Frank shook his head. “Chocolate.” He considered heading out to the observatory after his doughnut.

Ted sighed. “You *would* pick the one on the bottom, wouldn't you?” He began stacking doughnuts, glazed on one side of the plate, jelly-filled on the other. When he finally retrieved the chocolate glazed, he dropped it on a plate and pushed it along the counter toward Frank.

“Here.” He swatted at specks of powdered sugar on his apron. “Where was I?” he asked.

Frank broke his doughnut in half so he could dunk it. “You were telling me how great you used to be with the ladies.” He wanted to be more direct, but Ted was fully aware of his lifelong bachelordom. No need to mention the loneliness and the denial. No need to remind him how he'd failed to impress Julia before Frank finally got tired of waiting and asked her out.

Frank tried to listen to Ted's misplaced bravado, but the caffeine made him jumpy and distracted. He thought he might run into a few of his old colleagues at the observatory. They would chat about their students, the great new photos of the Crab Nebula, or they'd challenge each other to discover the highest known redshift quasar in return for a case of champagne. But he'd be better off getting some sleep. And he had to face the apartment sometime.

When he finished his doughnut and drained the rest of his coffee, he considered adding a case of cigarettes to his tab, but, each time he thought about it, he heard Julia's voice in his head, saying, "You don't need those. You're stronger than that." He could see her sitting next to him, one shoulder to her chin, smiling her "you're so frustrating it's adorable" smile. He saw her bright and blue-eyed faith in him, and he believed he could quit.

He pinched one of the last three cigarettes and placed the filter on his wrinkled lips, dropping the near-empty box on the nightstand near his keys. He reached for the tiny pink lighter he'd found on the sidewalk during his earlier walk to Ted's. The flint was so small his thumb scraped against it several times, landing ineffectually on the plastic. Finally, crossing his eyes, shuddering as he inhaled, he placed the lighter in the pocket of his pajama bottoms and sank enraptured into a haze of tobacco-inspired nausea. He chastised the cigarette for being the wrong brand. Ted had given him a pack of Newports for helping him clean up the store last Friday night after another pack of young punks had flung bags of chips, boxes of macaroni and cheese, Hershey bars, graham crackers, marshmallows, peanuts, cleansers, all of it on the floor, and for what? For a few minutes of youthful anarchy. Frank had grumbled and moaned with Ted, but, secretly, he was jealous. He missed those moments.

Frank hated Newports. But they were free. You don't turn down free cigarettes. Every time he smoked a Newport, he remembered the rumor that surfaced way back in high school: Newports had pieces of broken glass in them. If you smoke Newports, your lungs will bleed. Smoke spread through the crevices of his lungs. His hand fell to his side in the bed. He felt relaxed, fully appreciating this third of his dwindling supply, but he couldn't shake the sense that blood was collecting in his lungs.

The lamp was on, but it was dim. An orangey-yellow glow illuminated the blankness of the walls, lighter in places where Julia's pictures had hung. The dimness, the emptiness, the rumpled sheets on his half of the bed – he was reminded of a sex scene in a movie. The voluptuous woman in black negligee was about to make an entrance. But there was no woman. He tried to determine what movie he was thinking of, but he couldn't remember. He only envisioned silence, smoke, and lighting, always a little too dim. He wondered when he would finally grow too old for such thoughts. On the other half of the bed, smooth white sheets remained tucked beneath the mattress, on the left side where Julia had slept for forty-two years. He yanked them and flung them loosely back, where they fell in crumpled swirls, leaving the impression that someone had lain there sleeping. Much better.

Julia's photos sat crammed in a box in the closet, where they couldn't remind him of her. He'd expunged her remains from every corner of the apartment, even started using store brand fabric softener instead of the expensive kind she had insisted was worth the extra cost. He couldn't stand the scent anymore. It reminded him too much of her. He'd rewashed all his clothes, bought new sheets and towels. He'd kept only her photos and her camera, locked away in the closet, where maybe one day he'd have the strength to look at them again. But not today.

Inhaling more shards of tar from the Newport he loathed and loved, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and plugged his feet into his moccasins. A nice long gaze into the heavens always helped clear his mind. Or muddy it with astronomical perplexities, depending on how you looked at it. He paused to consider his blue and white pinstriped pajama bottoms. A jacket would cover the matching shirt, but the bottoms were hard to hide. He thought about changing but decided against it. Why bother? He was retired now. No job to consider. No university donors to schmooze. No wife to impress. Just him and the night sky. At least he could always count on that.

The cigarette hung from his lips as he slung a flimsy black windbreaker over his shoulders. In the mirror, he glimpsed himself and smiled to see how yellow his teeth looked. He looked wretched, but he didn't care. He would brush his teeth in the morning. He zipped the jacket, grabbed his fishing hat and lighter, and headed for the door. The cool night air invigorated him as he stepped onto the balcony overlooking the pool. He reached for his keys as the door closed, locking behind him. He pictured the Newports on his nightstand, the wallet, the keys lying next to them. He blamed the cigarettes for his carelessness. He'd never locked himself out when he had his regular Marlboros. He glanced at his pajamas again and shrugged. It wasn't too far to Ted's. A twenty-minute walk sounded like a good idea anyway. Maybe it would help him relax. He started walking, noticing the breeze as it traced through his eyebrows and up his forehead, threatening to lift his father's fishing hat from his head.

He descended the concrete steps from the balcony and crossed through the side yard of the apartment complex, trying to step between patches of dried leaves on the ground so he wouldn't make too much noise. Leaves above him shuddered, etching invisible scratches in the wind. He approached the sidewalk that ran parallel to Brookfield Avenue. The houses across

Brookfield were dark and quiet. The only light shone from the faraway streetlamp in front of Ted's store, a blurred pattern of light spiraling outward from the lamp like the radiant rings of Saturn. He blinked to focus his eyes, thinking again how greatly exaggerated are the perquisites of retirement. Frank watched the lamp flicker as he walked. He squinted at the windows above Ted's store, trying to discern whether a light was on in Ted's apartment, but he couldn't tell. Instead, he looked up. Even with his bad eyes, he could see Orion's belt and Venus in retrograde, watching over him through a veil of distant clouds.

They pulled up to the ridge overlooking all of Casington. After so many years of marriage – so many events experienced twofold, once through his eyes, once through hers – few experiences brought back such vivid memories of his teens. He made it a point to take Julia to the ridge at least once a year. Through the windshield, they couldn't see the town at all, only a smattering of stars overhead.

“They're so beautiful that I don't know what to do with them,” she said, scrunching her face toward the dashboard. She tilted her head awkwardly upward, trying to see more.

“What do you mean?” Frank asked. “You're not supposed to do anything with them. You're supposed to look at them.” Sometimes, her comments made no sense at all. Early on, he'd tried to correct her logical inconsistencies. But eventually, he'd learned that she had fascinating insights. He could explain dozens of theories developed by great minds from Pythagoras to Kepler to Penzias and Wilson, but what harm could it do to wonder for a moment what it would be like to hold a star?

Julia smiled and opened the car door. She slid into the night and walked to the front of the car. Her frail arms quivered. She hugged herself, running her palms up and down her arms

for warmth. Frank turned off the ignition but left the stereo on and the windows open. Silently, he moved to the front of the car and leaned against the hood behind her. He wrapped his arms around her waist and squeezed, pulling her gently toward him. He watched the breeze sweep through the curls of her bronze-and-ash hair, the neighborhood lost in a swarm of trees behind her, twinkling lights poking through branches in strange constellations below. He nestled his head against the side of her neck.

“I don’t want to *look* at them. I want to touch them. I want to hold them. I want to do something to make me feel closer to them. I can’t explain it,” she said. “It’s – I just want them.” She shrugged.

He inhaled, still fascinated by the scent of her shampoo, after so many smoke-free years. “I know what you mean.” He smiled and stared at the ground, where a penny caught his eye. Somehow, he’d never lost the fluttering feeling he got when he tried to tell Julia that he loved her. Every time, his lips fumbled around the wrong sounds. He’d thought it would get easier with time, but it didn’t. He still had to clear his throat before he uttered a romantic phrase, and it still came out hoarse and awkward like it had back in high school, when they’d met in the shabby planetarium that doubled as a dark room for the photography club. He bent down and reached for the penny. 1956. He would have been a sophomore in college, struggling through Professor Elgin’s Advanced History of Archaeoastronomy. Julia used to tell him he’d learn to appreciate the course, but no one could have convinced him he’d teach it one day. He slipped the penny in his jacket pocket, trying to summon a phrase to describe how beautiful she was with those streaks of grey in her hair.

As he opened his mouth, Julia pushed herself off the hood and hurried to the side of the car. Caught in the wind, her hair flapped wildly against her ears. She repeatedly reached to tuck

it behind her ear, to no effect. She leaned through the passenger's window for her camera bag and her sweater. She pulled herself from the window and returned to the front of the car.

Handing the camera bag to Frank, she swung her sweater around her shoulders. With a quick shiver, she smoothed the front of her sweater and retrieved the bag from Frank's hand.

Reflexively, she unzipped the bag, dropping it to the ground with the camera held ready to shoot. She placed the neck strap around her neck, removed the lens cap, and pointed the lens at the sky, turning a dial atop the camera. She frowned and turned to Frank. "Pictures aren't the same."

"Why do you need a picture, anyway? You can come outside to look at the stars every night."

"That's not the same, either. There are stars up there tonight that won't exist tomorrow, aren't there? I want to freeze this spot, this moment." She pointed upward. "Those stars. Not tomorrow's."

"Don't photographs do the same thing?" he asked.

She gave him that frustrated smile of hers and didn't need to reply. She raised the camera again and a bright flash echoed through the darkness. Frank's eyes took a minute to adjust. When he could see again, he grabbed the camera from her hands and pointed it at her.

"Hey, no pictures of me," she said, laughing.

Julia approached him, pouting, but he quickly raised the camera above his head. Forty years ago, she'd learned she couldn't win, so she resisted his game of keep-away. She just slipped her arms around his torso and squeezed. Frank kissed her and lowered his arms, bending her backwards and placing the camera on the ground. A scratchy oldies tune played on the car stereo.

"Do you remember this song?" he asked.

“No. Do you?”

“No.” He shrugged. “Care to dance?”

“Of course.”

Frank took her right hand in his and wrapped his left arm around her waist. Beneath her bulky sweater, he could feel the curve of her slender waistline. An accidental brush of the hand still made him smile, but a dance – that was a treat he would happily extend forever if he could. They spun in the starlight to static-filled music until they both began to worry that the car battery might die.

Frank caught himself twirling around, humming a song a he didn't know, his moccasins crossing the sidewalk like it was the grass overlooking miniscule downtown Casington. He could almost feel the warmth of another human body enfolded in his arms. A lump caught in his throat as he thought how many of the stars they'd seen that night had since burst into pulsars, their beauty evaporated, emitting only faint radio waves through the silent void of space.

The lump in his throat turned into a scratchy ball of phlegm. He stopped, gagged, placed his hands on his knees, and coughed. When he swallowed, he tasted ash. The light by Ted's store continued to flicker ahead. It would still be a few minutes before he reached it. He resumed walking, cursing himself for leaving the cigarettes behind, for locking himself out, for never having studied more about Stonehenge. The wind started to gain momentum, and he began to worry that he should've brought an umbrella. But the more he thought about it, the more he realized he didn't care if he got wet. He might get cold, and he might catch pneumonia, and pneumonia might even kill him. But he didn't care. He looked at the sky, halfway hoping the wind would pick up, twist itself into a tornado, and carry him away.

The wind shifted the clouds to reveal a yellow sliver of moon. As he walked, his toe struck an object that bounced and clinked on the sidewalk. He jerked his eyes downward, trying to catch the culprit in motion, but the noise had already ceased. He bent down to examine the sidewalk in front of his toes. From a crouch, the sidewalk appeared more cracked and uneven, and he wondered how he hadn't already stumbled more than he had. About a foot in front of his moccasins, he finally spotted a badly tarnished key. He flipped it over in his hand, studying the irregular pattern of scratches and chips in the metal. Standing back up, he shook his head and chuckled. "Figures. Lot of damn good this'll do." He huffed, mumbling to himself, "Why couldn't I find a cigarette instead of a key?"

He stood up again, placing the key in his pocket, noticing that the lump in his throat had worsened. He tried to swallow but couldn't. He labored to pull breath into his lungs, and cursed the nicotine-free air. It was all he could do to keep walking the rest of the way to the store without faltering, falling, leaning back, looking at the sky, and sobbing. He longed for someone to tell him he'd feel better soon, just so he could yell, say they were wrong, demand that his indescribable torment was too complex to be understood.

When he arrived at Ted's, the store lights were out. He leaned his face to the glass and cupped his hands around his eyes to hide the flickering light from the streetlamp. The store was empty except for a million little boxes, promising relief from one malady or another. Frank stepped back to glance up at Ted's apartment above the store. If he couldn't reach Ted, he would have to sit on the sidewalk in front of the store until morning, and he didn't know if he could wait that long. Ted was his only hope. His gaze returned to a metal gate that stood between him and the store windows. He reached through the diamond-shaped openings and knocked on the glass. He stopped to listen for a response, a voice, a noise in the lock, a footstep inside. He

concentrated on the spot in the back of the store where he knew Ted's office was, but nothing changed.

Still hanging onto the grate with his hands, Frank leaned his head forward and felt the cold of the metal against his forehead through the coarse fabric of his hat. He didn't know what to do. He tried to breathe, tried to swallow, tried to clear his mind completely, tried again. As a last hope, he pulled the key from his pocket and looked at the lock on the gate. He reached for the padlock and gingerly traced one finger along the keyhole. Perhaps if only he tried hard enough, he could coax the key into fitting the lock. He leaned closer to inspect the intricate folds of metal in the keyhole, comparing them to the shape of the key he'd found. Placing the edge of a fingernail in the keyhole, he could almost feel the barrel quiver beneath his touch. The wind blew again, knocking the gate against the windows of the store. The padlock felt cold and damp, limp in his hand. He breathed onto the metal and rubbed the lock, thinking maybe if he warmed it a little, he'd have more luck. The effort of focused breathing caused him to drop the lock against the gate and cough. With one fist covering his mouth, he hung onto the gate with the other hand. He needed a cigarette soon, even if he had to break into the store to get one.

He rubbed the key with his hand until the cold, damp metal felt warm and smooth. Gently, he guided the key into the lock and pushed, repeatedly, trying to force the lock open. His wrists began to burn. His hands throbbed. His eyes filled with tears. Finally, he threw the key to the ground, and grabbed hold of the gate with both hands. He leaned back and forth, shaking the gate. The whole metal framework lurched and swayed with his weight. He looked at the sky, briefly demanding a reason for his torture before focusing on the rattling gate, the noise resounding in his chest. The racket was oddly satisfying. He couldn't stop shaking, gaping,

wide-mouthed, shouting in pain, gulping air. With each swing of his body forward and back, the gate clanged more loudly against the windows. His entire body tensed.

“Where are you?” he shouted. “Where are you?”

Mashing the gate against the storefront, he continued shouting, trying to wake the only person who could help him. An alarm started blaring in his ears. Lights turned on in nearby houses. But he didn’t stop. He couldn’t. Just before he swung the gate a final time, he glanced upward, thought he spied the image of Julia illuminated in stars, making him ever more in love with night. He watched the curves of her face crease and shatter as the store window crashed to the ground. He stumbled backward.

When he caught his breath, he sat on the curb and put his head in his hands. Pulling his hands away from his face, he looked down and watched a few streams of blood trickle and gather in the wrinkles along his wrists. He was still staring at his hands when Ted opened the door and lifted the gate from inside.

“What the hell are you doing?” Ted yelled. “What’d I ever do to you?”

Frank turned to look at the front of the store, then turned back to Ted and stared. His cheeks felt wet and warm. He wondered how much of his face was bleeding.

Ted’s eyes softened. “You okay?” he asked. He moved to sit next to Frank on the curb, his arthritic knees cracking from the effort. “You okay?” he asked again when he’d finally managed to sit.

Frank turned his eyes to the ground, where he spotted the old key. He picked it up and turned it over in his hand.

“It didn’t work,” Frank said, staring at the key.

“What?”

“The key. It didn’t work.”

“What, on the gate?”

Frank nodded.

“That’s not the key to the store, Frank.”

Frank noticed Ted staring at his pajamas and fishing hat, the fur-lined leather slippers. He felt drops from his cheeks fall onto the sleeve of his jacket. He tossed the key into the street and searched for his lighter. With a shaking hand, he held it up and looked at Ted, hoping the little piece of pink plastic could convey a message. Ted shook his head and sighed, reaching for a fresh pack of Newports. “I thought you quit.” He lit two cigarettes at once and handed one to Frank.

Breathing in toxic fumes and holding his breath, Frank gratefully envisioned shards of glass shredding his lungs. When he breathed out, he tried to remember what that moment used to feel like, that satisfied moment of exhalation he and Julia used to share. A sharp hunger clung to the lining of his stomach, and he wondered how many cigarette butts he’d have to stamp out before the yearning was finally extinguished.