

## *Where She Went*

*Taylor Brown*

I remember those late winter nights. The sun snuffed out by seven, the chill that crept its way into the very marrow of my bones. I can still feel it. The wind that sucked the air right out of my lungs. I'd be left gasping, clutching my throat, cursing the scarf that lay on the kitchen table, miles away. January was the worst. Everything from the streetlights to the mailboxes was coated in ice. I think it was around this time when I had pretty much given up.

The vibrant hues had faded into a kaleidoscope of grey. I watched TV without the sound; the vaguely familiar images projected onto my face. I was deeply sickened, yet immobilized. I couldn't have moved, even if I'd wanted to. I started to bite my nails and skip meals and lay in bed for hours. I stopped painting for a very, very long time. Blank canvases lay on my bedroom floor. I stepped over them with the same courtesy I owe tombstones. I couldn't bring myself to finish a single painting. Nothing, I found, could retain my interest. Like the winter I found myself in, I feared this would never end.

I spent many of those nights standing at cash. I watched customers come and go, stop for a chat, pick up their Advil and scurry back to their cars. I watched them through a giant window that covered the front of the store. In the gloom of the evening, I could see my own ghostly reflection, coated in a fluorescent glow. I saw the rows upon rows of shelves behind me. The massive posters that depicted photo-shopped families. When the sun was up, I observed the world's rotation through the glass. The ebb and flow of customers was the revolution. The drugstore was the axis.

Comfortable in my cabin fever, I smiled at the customers and pretended to be pleasant. I caught my reflection in an old woman's sunglasses; my teeth were straight and pearly, my lips

curled into a Cheshire grin. Everything about the distorted image reeked of insincerity. My façade was flimsy; I could feel the corners of my mouth twitching.

I've found that customers don't care about being served by a genuine individual; they just want someone who forgets to charge for bags and wishes them a nice night. They don't care whether or not I actually mean it. I contemplated this while an old woman accused me of punching in the wrong price, charging an extra twenty-five cents for a can of soup like the heathen I am. As she huffed and scoffed, I called a merchandiser for a price check. While my co-worker checked the label, the woman continued to complain.

"This *always* happens when I come here. Just this store, you know. I never have a problem with the one on Walnut Lane. I should just stop coming here altogether."

"I'm sorry. Sometimes we make mistakes on the labels. I'll fix it right away," I promised with a smile.

I hoped I would never see that miserable woman ever again. Or that man who, after I told him I didn't know when the lottery draw was, looked into my eyes and told me I was going to die. Or that lady that whines about forking over five cents for a bag on her hundred-dollar purchase. Or the people that throw a fit when I refuse their expired coupons. It's hard to sympathize with people when they're fixated on things that really and truly don't matter. What does human exploration matter? What does spiritual enlightenment matter? It appears as though all that counts in this world is a twenty-five cent difference on a can of soup.

After dealing with that woman, I was rewarded with a rare occasion of solitude. I peered through the window. There was a world outside. Beyond the parking lot was the highway. Beyond the highway, even more highways. The nearby coffee shop leaked warm light. It spilled onto the cracked pavement, the faded yellow lines. There were a few streetlights, some stray

shopping carts. Cigarette butts were scattered around the parking lot. I knew a girl that used to light butts from the ground and smoke them right down to the filter. In moments like that, moments when I'm alone in a public place, I wonder where she ended up.

My eyes focussed on something in the foreground. A small figure stood before the highway, the pavement, the power lines. It was a girl. She was young, but her eyes were ancient. They were murky like a frog pond, clouded over in thought. She stared at me. I was afraid the crushing collapse of my eyelids would scare her away. I stiffened. She stiffened.

She stood in the frigid winter air, unfazed by the cold. A cigarette lay smoldering by her shoe. The squeak of rubber against linoleum startled me out of my reverie. I turn suddenly to face the customer. I greeted the young man with my signature plastic smile. As he searched his wallet to pay for his groceries, I again looked to the window. She was there, her head turned to face me. I looked at the highway and the power lines behind her - the world that existed beyond the drugstore.

*Why don't you just go?* I demanded of her silently. Her gaze did not waver.

As I turned to the customer, so did she. As I reached for the bill in his hand, as did she. She smiled that same Cheshire smile. I wondered, for the second time that night, where my friend ended up. I wondered if she still picks up cigarettes, or if she buys her own. I wondered if she ever found what she was looking for. I wondered, for the first time that night, what it's like to have people wonder about you.

Like many of the things I write, this piece was destined for the bin.

That is, until Ms. Lundy introduced the OSSTF/FEESO contest to Dunbarton's Writing Club. We meet every Friday at lunch to share our work, discuss the creative process and sometimes even write. Ms. Lundy explained the theme: Mirror Mirror - object specific, but applicable to a variety of scenarios. She challenged us to "power write" for a few minutes, which is where the last few paragraphs of my story was born. It was stuffed into my notebook and didn't see the light of day until exactly a week later, when Ms. Lundy asked us to share. Upon reading my fragment of a story aloud, the group offered some suggestions. They opened my eyes to the story's potential. When I got home, I hunted through my book of ideas and poetry. I pieced together the first two-thirds of my story. After some editing, I showed the product to Ms. Lundy. She suggested I cut out a few things that, as I quickly realized, hindered the piece. "Where She Went" may be one of the best stories I've written in a while and to think, without the help from Ms. Lundy and the rest of the Writing Club, it would've been wadded into a ball and tossed away.